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CHINESE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE AND “THE MELTING POT”

Summary

The history of the United States is unmistakably the history of immigrants, and the make-up of American society is living proof of the immigration history of this country. With diverse ethnic groups expanding and becoming more numerous and better represented it is obvious that their literature waits to be fully discovered and appreciated. The aim of this paper is to prove that immigrants do not necessarily lose their ethnic identity living in the United States; rather they frequently tend to preserve their original customs and beliefs, sometimes adapting them to their new environment. They want to retain their own cultural and ethnic heritage as well as their personal identity while assimilating themselves into new environments and standards of living. The Chinese-American experience presented in literature is particularly interesting as Chinese-Americans are culturally and physically distinct from the dominant white community.

Key words: *immigrants, multiculturalism, identity, society, USA*

The ever-growing interest in American ethnic literature should come to us as no surprise. America is, after all, a land of immigrants, although their acceptance and recognition was frequently a difficult issue. The past has not always been kind to immigrants to the United States, coming to “the promised land” from all continents, from all walks of life and for all the reasons one could possibly think of. The history of the United States is unmistakably the history of immigrants and the make-up of American society is living proof of the immigration history of this country. With diverse ethnic groups expanding and becoming more numerous and better represented it is obvious that this literature waits to be fully discovered and appreciated. The interest in various ethnicities, their literature, culture and customs has increased rapidly since the 1970s, which has resulted in the proliferation of numerous new authors from different ethnic backgrounds as well as the rediscovery of “forgotten” ethnic authors. We should not, as a matter of fact, speak of this literature as “ethnic” since we *all* belong

to one or more ethnic groups. If immigrants are an integral part of American society, and they are, then the term American ethnic literature is redundant. We should rather discuss American literature as a whole, as an integral literature where everybody is represented. In an attempt to reconcile the distinction between mainstream American or "WASP" literature and ethnic literature a new term has been constructed. We nowadays speak of a multicultural American literature which comprises all ethnicities (including the dominant WASPs) and treats them as equal constituent parts of all of American literature. This process has not been completed, although ethnic literature is increasingly included in anthologies of American literature and it is generally accepted and receives a positive response both in the United States and abroad.

Many issues regarding American ethnic literature have been deemed problematic. The very term ethnic caused commotion as it carried different, meaning frequently negative and discriminatory, undertones. Furthermore, the work by various ethnic authors was not considered literature, but rather an account of the life of "ethnics" that possesses little, if any, literary value. It is only after the civil rights struggles of the 1960s that a massive change of perception and attitude towards the diversity of American literature occurred. The outcome of this new liberation was an abundance of "new" literature which introduced a new vocabulary, customs and cultural differences. What also followed was a more liberal identity politics allowing not only a recognition within any given social, ethnic or racial group, but also the possibility to be a member of two or more of these groups. Nowadays it is relatively easy to identify with a number of groups simultaneously, retaining one's own separate identity and distinction. This relation between ethnicity and identity seems to be one of the main features of the new multiculturalism in America.

It looks as if America's melting pot is no more. Forced assimilation gave way to multiculturalism and instead of melting the constituent ethnicities to a bland mass, we prefer to see them as a "salad bowl," where all the parts are visibly present and they equally contribute to the unique product of American multicultural society. And they are not in the least reluctant to write about their personal experiences in this "brave new world."

The aim of this paper is to prove that immigrants do not necessarily lose their ethnic identity living in the United States; rather they frequently tend to preserve their original customs and beliefs, sometimes adapting them to their new environment. They want to retain their own cultural and ethnic heritage as well as their personal identity while assimilating to new environments and standards of living. American ethnic literature is full of examples of people who cling to their ethnic culture and who at the same time create their identity in a new homeland. This occurrence is not a new phenomenon. Detailed accounts of the life of "ethnics" in the new world have

been issues of scientific discussions since the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States. The Chicago school of sociology and their German predecessors were the first to realize the circumstances of existence under which the newly arrived “ethnics” lived in America. Their efforts to describe ethnicity as a means of cultural expression and identification proves that they were already aware of the myriad of issues that usually develop from similar discussions such as those about melting pot and pluralism, racial issues, assimilation, identity, migration, transnationalism, the generation gap and religion, to name just a few. Sociologists and anthropologists were able to describe new group affiliations and general patterns of behavior characteristic for all ethnic groups in America, such as life in ethnic communities, changes in ethnic identity, attempts to preserve their cultural heritage etc. Scholars were not the only ones who were ready to recognize the phenomenon of “unmelttable ethnics.” The general public also became increasingly aware of the new ethnic situation in the country. In 1905, Israel Zangwill, an English Jew, wrote a four-act play *The Melting Pot* which illustrated the life of a Jewish family in New York and their interaction with various ethnicities. This showed that people still desire to keep their original ethnic qualities although they attempt to redefine themselves in new circumstances. The play was an immediate success and what is more important “the rhetoric of Zangwill’s play shaped American discourse on immigration and ethnicity, including most notably the language of self-declared opponents of the melting-pot concept” (Sollors, 66).

The term “melting” was discussed even much earlier, although in different terms, by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in 1782 in his *Letters from an American Farmer* in which he asks his famous question “What then is the American, this new man?” and continues his discussion by claiming that all nations will become one American race.

What then is the American, this new man? [...] *He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*: Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. (Crèvecoeur, 39)

Although Crèvecoeur’s desires and ideas may have been noble, the reality of everyday life has shown different opportunities for different ethnicities. All were not equally welcome and accepted into this “great *Alma Mater*.” The two most prominent ethnic groups who were historically less than welcome to join this big family were Native-Americans, or Indians, and African-American, or Blacks. Indians are not

typical ethnic immigrants, as they already inhabited the North American continent when the first European immigrants arrived. From the early days of immigration to the United States they were denied basic human rights and were usually treated as savages who need to be isolated and kept in reservations, or, even worse, eradicated or exterminated. Blacks are another dominant ethnic group that suffered racial discrimination from the days when the first slaves were brought to the States from Africa or the West Indies. These two major groups were never invited to enjoy the full privileges of life in the new “promised land.”

It seems that the “great *Alma Mater*” was most willing to accept the immigrants of European descent, while other ethnicities were not rewarded any kind of privileged status. Even among the immigrants of European descent there were significant differences in reception and opportunities offered. The most favorable groups were the white, protestant immigrants of English descent (WASPs), followed by other English-speaking immigrants, notably Scottish, Welsh, Irish, and central European or Scandinavian immigrants. These were followed by south and east European immigrants, although all those who were not WASPs were frequently discriminated against by the dominating ethnicity.

Immigrants from other continents were much worse off, especially those whose race and/or physical features made them look distinctly different from the dominant community. This is the category in which immigrants of Chinese descent belong. Their being significantly different contributed to their mistreatment and low social status in America. The list of discriminatory measures brought against the Chinese in the United States included their temporary acceptance by America i.e. a short-term labor after which they were returned to China. This included the prevention of the immigration of female Chinese immigrants and allowing the Chinese to work only in fields that usually included more physically demanding work and they were given work that was less paid, such as work in mining and railroad construction. However, with the easing of repressive measures against the Chinese in the States, this Asian community was finally able to develop itself into one of more prosperous ethnic groups in the States due to their hard work and diligence. Today the Chinese American community is quite numerous with some 2,432,000 inhabitants, making up some 1 % of the total number of inhabitants of the United States (US census 2000 – Chinese American Data Center).

Their physical features make them highly recognizable in the United States and this makes an additional contribution to their distinction in their country of residence. The unique experience of life of Chinese Americans in America is a frequent theme in the work of many Chinese American authors. The attempt to describe their life experience from a different ethnic perspective is frequently undertaken as through

a desire to protect and preserve their ethnic heritage and at the same time to explain and understand their personal identity shaped both by their ethnicity and mainstream culture. The correlation between ethnicity and identity is thus one of the most powerful issues in Chinese American literature and it deserves a more detailed analysis and consideration. Amy Tan has been one of the most prominent Chinese American authors ever since her first novel *The Joy Luck Club* appeared in 1989. Even before that her articles depicting various Chinese American issues drew the attention of literary critics and the general public in America. Together with Maxine Hong Kingston, who was her role model in a way (E. D. Huntley, 31), Amy Tan is unmistakably recognized as the leading Chinese American novelist and one of the most prominent “ethnic” authors in the United States. Her novels have become instant best sellers and have received unreserved recognition, both in America and abroad. The novels of Amy prove the importance of ethnicity and a struggle to come to terms with one’s own identity in a multicultural society such as the United States. The five novels of Amy Tan — *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1992), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1997), *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001) and *The Opposite of Fate* (2003) deal with a broad aspect of ethnicity and identity trying to describe and understand the complexity of existence of first- and second-generation Chinese Americans. Her writing is loaded with numerous experiences both from her personal life and the lives of her relatives, friends and acquaintances from different Chinese American communities in the San Francisco area. In her novels Amy Tan explores the themes of cultural translation, mother-daughter relationships, storytelling, the duality of immigrant identity and sexism in Chinese culture. Although it is not wise to claim that her work represents each and every Chinese American, I am quite sure that many of them might easily identify with the issues that Amy Tan explores in her novels.

However, some critics believe she has not been represented completely accurately. Writer Frank Chin, who is also a member of the Asian American community, has criticized Amy Tan for distorting historical facts and for conforming to stereotypes about the Chinese in America. Tan frequently answers these accusations by saying that she writes first and foremost as an artist (E. D. Huntley, 39). In her work, she addresses issues that are universally applicable to all ethnic groups in America, although her first aim is to portray the Chinese American experience. Her work provides a detailed and sincere insight into the life of first- and second-generation of Chinese Americans that is frequently written out of her personal experience. The aim of this essay is to research Amy Tan’s Chinese American artistic expression of ethnic identity. The analysis of her novels provides a multitude of information not only about ethnicity and identity but also about the Chinese American community in general.

Defining the term ethnicity may prove to be a difficult task given the number of situations where the word can be used to denote different concepts as well as because of the historical changes that influenced its original meanings and usage. As late as the 1970s, ethnicity was still regarded to be a new and quite confusing word whose origin was even more uncertain. The coauthors of *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan traced the origin of the term and concluded in their collection *Ethnicity* from 1975 that “[e]thnicity seems to be a new term. In the sense in which we use it – the character or quality of an ethnic group – it does not appear in the 1933 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but it makes its appearance in the 1972 Supplement, where the first usage recorded is that of David Riesman in 1953” (Sollors, 22).

It seemed that David Riesman was the first one to use this term. However, the fact that Riesman used the word ethnicity “without any self-consciousness and without a hint of semantic innovation” (Sollors, 23) made Werner Sollors undertake a detailed search for the first occurrence of the term. What made Sollors certain that there must have been an earlier usage of the term was the fact that in 1977 Riesman was surprised to hear that he had invented the word. Sollors was able to find an even earlier occurrence of the term in W. Lloyd Warner’s *Yankee City Series*, a community study of Newburyport, Massachusetts from 1941, where Warner and Paul Lunt describe the various ethnic groups in the city - “(1) Native, or Yankee; (2) Irish; (3) French (French Canadian); (4) Jewish; (5) Italian; (6) Armenian; (7) Greek; (8) Polish; (9) Russian; and (10) Negro” and write that “[t]he term ‘ethnic’, as used in this study, does not refer simply to foreign birth. Rather, it has a wider meaning. An individual was classified as belonging to a specific group if (1) he considered himself or was considered by the Yankee City community as a member of the group, and (2) if he participated in the activities of the group” (Sollors, 23).

We can already notice the ambiguity of classifying the term ethnic. First, “ethnicity” is an inclusive category, according to which *all* inhabitants of Newburyport can be classified. However, the term “ethnicity” was also used to denote all inhabitants except “the Natives, or Yankees.” This means that we can also understand the term “ethnicity” as a term excluding dominant groups. This phenomenon is also known in the United States as “ethnicity minus one.” We could conclude that only White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) would be exempt from being classified as ethnic, while everybody else would fall within some category of ethnic classification. In spite of various attempts to include WASPs into ethnic classification, it has remained a widespread practice to define them as “non-ethnic.” In order to describe the reasons for such a practice one should go back in time and explain the roots and conflicting uses of “ethnicity” and “ethnic”. Why is it that “ethnicity” is a term still obscure and

unclear to the majority of native speakers of English? They appear to be confused by both the earlier negative undertones of the word and present attempts to define ethnicity as an integral part of every human being.

“As a term, ethnicity is a product of a long-standing feature of English sociolinguistics—the tendency to look to Greek, Latin, French, or more generally, Romance models, when a new word is needed to fancify a plain idea or expression” (Hutchinson and Smith, 19). The word “ethnicity” stems from the Greek term *ethos*, which is translated into French as *ethnie*, with the derived adjective *ethnique*. In English the adjectival form is ethnic, but there is no direct translation for the Greek noun *ethnos*. Therefore, a suffix was added to the adjective ethnic to give ethnicity. The Greek adjective *ethnikos*, from which the noun *ethnos* stems and from which the English “ethnic” and “ethnicity” stem, meant “gentile” and “heathen,” and “is very nearly synonymous with *barbaros*, with all its moral, social and linguistic content—the barbarians were those who spoke unintelligible languages, and wanted for civilization, who were beyond the bounds of meaning, order and decency” (Sollors, 20).

We should not be surprised then that many people refuse to be described as “ethnic” as the attribute may carry various negative connotations. The Greek noun *ethnos* was used both to denote people in general as well as “others”.

It is characteristic of this area of vocabulary, perhaps in all languages, that any term for ‘people’ in a general sense, has the potential for being taken up into a duality of ‘us’ and ‘them’, and from early use this has been the fate of *ethnos*. The term co-existed with *genos*, more commonly used by Greeks of Greeks themselves, in a more-or-less restricted kinship sense. In later uses, in New Testament Greek, *ethnos* comes to be used, as we might expect, to mean non-Christian and non-Jewish, in an attempt to render the Hebrew *goyim*. (Sollors, 20)

This is why the term kept its quality of defining different people contrastively and, what is equally important, frequently negatively. The term “ethnic,” along with its numerous derived forms, has long been used in English in its biblical meaning of “gentile,” denoting the “pagan” or “non-Christian” characteristics of a person or a group of people. Over time, the meaning of this word changed from meaning non-Israelite to non-Christian or “heathen”. Although in the mid-nineteenth century the word “ethnic” was given another meaning, “peculiar to a race or nation,” the English language “has retained the pagan memory of ‘ethnic’, often secularized in the sense of ethnic as other, as nonstandard, or, in America, as non fully American” (Sollors, 25).

Therefore, the word “ethnicity” still keeps its double role: describing an inclusive peoplehood which is shared by all Americans and denoting an otherness which

separates ethnics from mainstream culture, i.e. WASPs. The opposition of ethnic and American may also be interpreted as a distinction between heathens and chosen people, which again makes “ethnicity” a non-desired feature.

To make things even more complex, this discussion would be incomplete without addressing the concept of race within the notion of ethnicity. Although humans were earlier classified into four main races, we realize today that with so much interbreeding between human populations, we cannot speak of fixed boundaries between races and we are also aware of numerous variations within a single racial group which can be as significant as variation between two different racial groups.

Since the term race has a dubious descriptive value I propose to integrate it into the study of ethnicity or ethnic relations that are to follow later in the text. Many scholars have tackled this issue, leading to different outcomes. While some readily regard race as an integral part of ethnicity, others stress a need to differentiate between race and ethnicity. It is my intention not to treat the issue of race separately, but as an additional distinguishing factor within the discussion of ethnicity. People with different physical appearances may find it difficult to run away from their ethnic identity if they wish to. Such people tend more often to be discriminated due to their ethnic origin, since their physique is something they cannot break away from. It is something that clearly distinguishes them from the mainstream and dominant culture of the society they live in.

The dichotomy between non-ethnic Americans and ethnic “others” seems to remain equally confusing, although people are today more ready to express themselves as ethnic than they have ever been before, and we frequently hear the phrase “ethnics all” used as a battle cry for diversity in the United States.

In order to comprehend fully the circumstances that helped shape the dominant culture in the United States, one should go back to the time of first Puritan settlers. Their wish to exercise their religious convictions and to build a model society, “The [biblical] City upon a Hill,” has a firm stance in the Bible. Their desire to be “the chosen ones” or “saved” made them adopt certain strict moral codes of conduct based on their literal or fundamental reading of the Bible. At the same time they were attempting to create a new society based on consent rather than on descent. The relation between descent and consent represents a crucial issue in understanding the creation of American mainstream culture.

Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of ‘substance’ (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those by ‘law’ or ‘marriage.’ Descent relations emphasize our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language

stresses our abilities as mature free agents and ‘architects of our own fates’ to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems (Sollors, 6).

Based on the image of Christ being reborn, the Puritans also wanted to be reborn in a new land, i.e. they wanted to reform themselves into better people who live in unity with God and biblical doctrine. Sollors explains:

It is no coincidence that the image of Christ occurs in connection with the melting pot idea. [...] Not only did Christ represent the new order based on love, or consent, rather than the circumcision as the token of descent, but he also incorporated and merged opposites. Uniting the human with the divine nature in himself, Christ also dissolved the boundaries between man and man (Sollors, 81).

Thus, the idea of melting pot is anything but a new phenomenon. Based on religion, in the beginning “the melting process” included the Christening of those “pagans” and “heathens” who came to America, as it was the major prerequisite for being tolerated, or at least partially recognized as a human being. Christ was seen as a means to ethnic fusion and universalism, although many of those who embraced Christianity were still not fully accepted as rightful members of society. Such was the case for many Blacks and Indians who converted to Christianity, willingly or otherwise. The justification for the Christening of the “pagans” was found in the Bible, especially in Paul’s epistle to the Galatians: “For you all the children of Godly faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (quoted in Sollors, 83). There have been many forms of assimilation and many ways of “melting.” One of them described WASPs as a cook who is stirring and determining the temperature and ingredients for preparing a meal. However, there were also those who believed that everybody should be melted equally, without WASPs having “the upper hand.” One of the most famous promoters of this idea was Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, who described all new settlers as reformed and assimilated individuals in his essay “What is an American, this new man,” published in his volume *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782).

The idea of melting different nations into an American nation was readily used in the nineteenth century as an optimistic reason for an increased immigration policy. The transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson stated:

As in the burning of the Temple of Corinth, by the melting and intermixture of silver and gold and other metals a new compound,

more precious than any, called the Corinthian brass, was formed; so in this continent – asylum of all nations – the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, and Cossacks, and all the tribes – of the Africans, and of the Polynesians – will construct a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe that came out of the smelting-pot of the Dark Ages.... (quoted in Mann, 140)

Such concepts were readily accepted and modified over time to suit the purposes needed. America was still frequently compared to Jesus Christ and the process of Americanization or naturalization was frequently related to Christian rebirth or regeneration. However, it was perceived differently according to who needed regeneration. In 1859 Horace Bushnell made a clear distinction between “citizens” and “aliens” in the kingdom of God and claimed that only “aliens” are in need of regeneration, thus establishing the “regeneration minus one” idea, meaning that “citizens” need not regenerate.

Contrary to Bushnell, Ephraim Chamberlain Cummings explained in 1873 in his sermon “The Regeneration” that there can be no exception as everybody has to be reborn, both “citizens” and “aliens” (Sollors, 86).

The aforementioned examples prove that the desire to erase the distinction between different ethnicities already existed – these are the forerunners to the idea of the melting pot. These two positions are clearly opposite and they represent, in a way, an extension of the original conflict of descent and consent in America as some were granted privileged status whereas others still had to reform themselves. Bushnell was pleading for the “genetics of salvation,” as “citizens” received God’s grace “through the loyns of Godly parents” (quoted in Sollors, 86).

On the other hand, the opposite reaction by Cummings, sometimes referred to as “universal regeneration,” claimed that nobody should be excluded from regeneration. The first theory emphasized descent while the latter believed in consent. As we can see, the idea of the melting pot is firmly based on religion, or, in words of Sollors “[t]he melting pot may thus be understood as the ethnic variation on a religious theme, its ambiguities more clearly comprehended as part of conflict between descent and consent” (86).

Throughout history numerous examples of “universal regeneration” have been noted. Emory Bogardus claimed in his 1922 study “Essentials of Americanization:”

The native-born and the foreign-born alike must experience the process of Americanization. In the case of the natives, Americanization involves getting acquainted with the best American traditions and current standards, and practicing and trying to improve the quality

of these traditions and standards. In the case of the foreign-born, Americanization means giving up one set of well-known and, in part, precious loyalties for another set of loyalties, more or less new and unknown. To renounce one group of loyalties for another group involves a deep-seated and delicate re-adjustment of mental and social attitudes. (quoted in Sollors, 86)

Professor Anton Lang also supported the idea of universal regeneration:

Democracy is an experience – like religion – it has to be renewed by every generation – by every citizen. It is growing, not fixed. You can't look at it as something that was won once and for all, a hundred and fifty years ago, and that will always be there when it is needed. To every American it should always be as personal as it is to all new Americans. (quoted in Sollors, 88)

The best-known supporter of the idea of universal regeneration was John Dewey, who wrote in his address "Nationalizing Education" from 1916:

No matter how loudly any one proclaims his Americanism if he assumes that any one racial strain, any one component culture, no matter how early settled it was in our territory, or how effective it has proven in its own land, is to furnish a pattern to which all other strains and cultures are to conform, he is a traitor to an American nationalism. (quoted in Sollors, 88).

Contrary to the aforementioned opinions are the standpoints of those who believed in a "genetics of salvation" and the role of descent in hereditary election.

Convinced that Americanness comes from descent, Berrett Wendell renounced on March 31, 1917, the Russian Jewish immigrant Mary Antin, who stated in her autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912) that America belongs to all citizens, no matter when they immigrated: "For the Country was for all the Citizens, and I was a Citizen. And when we stood up to sing 'America,' I shouted the words with all my might" (226). Wendell said that she "has developed an irritating habit of describing herself and her people as American" and continued by stating:

"whether she has children I don't know. If she has, their children may perhaps come to be American in the sense in which I feel myself so – for better or worse, belonging only here. And that is the kind of miracle which America, for all its faults and its vulgarities, has wrought" (quoted in Sollors, 89). The idea of a "three-generation residence" was frequently believed in in America since third-generation immigrants

are native-born children of native-born parents and have acquired citizenship by birth. The issue of becoming American was dealt differently throughout history.

Unable to reach universal agreement on how to deal with the concept of Americanness, communities addressed the problem in a number of ways.

The melting pot rituals organized by Ford Motor Company English School were rather famous. Foreign-born employees had to undergo a ritualistic rebirth created for them by their employers. The November 1916 issue of Ford Times describes the "rebirth" in an article called "The Making of New Americans:"

In contrast to the shabby rags they wore when they were unloaded from the ship, all wore neat suits. They were American in looks. And ask anyone of them what nationality he is, and the reply will come quickly, 'American!' 'Polish-American?' you might ask. 'No, American,' would be the answer. For they are thought in the Ford school that hyphen is a minus sign. (quoted in Sollors, 91).

The graduated were taught to believe that their ethnicity is something that reduces their chances of being accepted into the new community and therefore it was something that you have to discard for good and; the sooner, the better. Only then could you expect to be a "real" citizen with all the rights and privileges that are vested in you as a rightful member of society.

While immigrants were initially expected to cast off their previous ethnicity, adhering to their new, American nationhood, over time hyphenation was reintroduced as an attempt to preserve one's original ethnicity. However, the hyphen was later dropped, believing that it denotes an unequal position within the compound word as the word "American" carries the meaning alone. Therefore, in order to be politically correct, we nowadays drop the hyphen sign between the two words.

Perhaps the most famous play dealing with issues of ethnicity and assimilation at the beginning of the twentieth century was Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* (1909). Zangwill's play was obviously the turning point in the broad reception of the melting pot issue (Sollors, 66) and it consequently contributed to the increased rejection of the melting pot idea since it became obvious that you do not need to "melt" to become a good American and that you can retain your ethnic character and still be a worthy person. The four-act play was an immediate success in the United States. During the following decades, the rejection of melting pot has also increased in America, particularly after the publication of Glazer and Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot*. In their study of the life of immigrants in New York in 1963 they observed the issue of "melting" in relation with different ethnic groups in New York and concluded that

[i]t was reasonable to believe that a new American type would emerge, a new nationality in which it would be a matter of indifference whether a man was of Anglo-Saxon or German or Italian or Jewish origin, and in which indeed, because of the diffusion of populations through all parts of the country and all levels of the social order, and because of the consequent close contact and intermarriage, it would be impossible to make such distinctions. (Glazer and Moynihan, 12)

It became obvious to them that the original idea of an American melting pot would not be sustainable, although immigrants usually lose much of their original culture upon arrival to the United States. However, Glazer and Moynihan also realized that

as the groups were transformed by influences in American society, stripped of their original attributes, they were recreated as something new, but still as identifiable groups. Concretely, persons think of themselves as members of that group, with that name; and most significantly, they are linked to other members of the group by new attributes that the original immigrants would never have recognized as identifying their group, but which nevertheless serve to mark them off, by more than simply name and association, in the third generation and even beyond. (Glazer and Moynihan, 12)

It became obvious that various ethnicities adapt differently because they themselves are very different one from another. The impact of assimilating trends on groups is different in part because the groups are different – Catholic peasants from Southern Italy were affected differently, in the same city and the same time, than urbanized Jewish workers and merchants from Eastern Europe. We cannot even begin to indicate how various were the characteristics of family structure, religion, economic experience and attitudes, and political outlook that differentiated groups from such different backgrounds. Obviously, some American influences affected them all and with the same effects. But their differences meant they were open to different parts of American experience, interpreting it in different ways, and using it for different ends. (Glazer and Moynihan, 12).

The authors of the study also concluded that this is just one of many possible reasons why different groups assimilate differently. Other reasons should be searched for within the nature of American society itself as it did not assimilate ethnic groups completely or to equal degrees. Consequently, various ethnic groups, upon losing their characteristic customs and culture, as is usually the case in the second generation, and even more fully in the third generation, “are continually recreated by new experiences

in America. The mere existence of a name itself is perhaps sufficient to form group character in new situations, for the name associates an individual, who actually can be anything, with a certain past, country, race” (Glazer and Moynihan, 17).

The sociological study of ethnicities in New York gave rise to many other similar studies and a widespread criticism of the melting pot. Gleason noted the growing phenomenon of rejecting the concept of the melting pot as a growing number of critics opposed it ready to “deny that it ever had any reality. The conventional wisdom is thus twofold: as an ideal or goal the melting pot is reprehensible, but in the practical order (fortunately, one presumes) it didn’t exist, never happened, failed to melt, and is a myth” (Gleason, 15).

The destiny of the melting pot idea in the United States appears to be sealed, at least for the time being. As immigrants are no longer required to “melt” completely and unconditionally, they nevertheless adapt American traits, culture and national character, at the same time preserving at least some features of their ethnic heritage, thus contributing to the richness of multicultural America. The final outcome is an American culture to which everyone contributes. However, this culture is mostly the result of the effects of mass production and popular culture. American culture is therefore the result of various cultural influences, and not the result of a coercive process of assimilation. Nonetheless, ethnicity is still a very important issue in the United States. The United States remains a sociological phenomenon, combining cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity in unique ways. Various ethnic communities and cultures are still very visible in America and they continue to influence the lifestyles, values and opinions of countless Americans. Therefore, the issue of ethnicity remains one of the central issues of American life.

The numerous aforementioned examples are a basic introduction to the most common issues and challenges that helped shape the American national character. As I have already mentioned, different ethnicities were adopted differently, they received different reception by mainstream American culture, and their opportunities and expectations were different. Generally speaking, the more similar to the mainstream culture they were, the easier it was for them to make a living in the new community. The Chinese American life in this new land was particularly harsh, burdened by numerous prejudices, huge cultural and social difference, as well as a language barrier. Although it is impossible to measure the level of difficulty that certain groups were facing in their assimilation into America, we could however state that the Asian nations, together with African Americans and Native Americans, received the least favorable treatment. This is why their existence in the United States is particularly challenging. In this light we should also observe the life of immigrants of Chinese American descent and their plight for rightful coexistence in the country so powerfully

wrought by various, often contradictory, ideals of the acceptance of ethnic groups. Their successful assimilation and consequent rise to the position of a “model minority” makes the study of the Chinese American experience a particularly interesting one. It is even more interesting if we observe their efforts to assimilate successfully within the mainstream culture while preserving their ethnic identity and at the same time constructing their personal, unique identity.

Even though American nationality is believed to have grown from suppositions of allegiance or ascriptive citizenship to principles of democratic membership, i.e. consensual citizenship, the treatment of ethnicity, national origin and race in the United States has been significantly different. The history of Chinese exclusion from America is closely related to the process of American national formation. America, being a no-nation state, does not have a homogenous ethnic base and therefore had to find a way to create a sort of fictive ethnicity and a fictive national identity. The presence of Chinese immigrants in the United States was perceived as an attack on the concept of Anglo-Saxon or European purity, and at the same time it opposed the idea of Manifest Destiny, which was believed to belong to European settlers exclusively. However, the arrival of European settlers to the West Coast prompted the increased immigration of Chinese and in order to prevent their mass immigration, the American authorities introduced a number of measures to stop Chinese immigration and thus save their envisioned national ethnicity and identity. Being “Oriental” and therefore perpetually visibly different, they were treated as perpetually “foreign,” since they were considered both antithetical and antagonistic to America. “Oriental” was frequently seen as the most visible and the most perilous type of difference, as the other to the Euro-American self. “Orientals” personified the historical tension between America’s universalist promise of democratic consent and its discriminatory practices of gaining citizenship. It was only in 1943 that “Orientals” in the United States became “Asian Americans” when they started to be recognized as either citizens or legal aliens. Nevertheless, they are still not regarded as possible representatives of the United States national imagery and symbolism. A part of the reason for this incomplete inclusion in American society can be found within the mass media and public education, which, as means of social and cultural reproduction, continue to secure the common sense of Asian Americans as aliens. Acquiring citizenship can be no guarantee of Asian American representation and they are only recognized in a formal or legal sense. While the law necessarily ensures the legal terms of citizenship, it cannot change the cultural conditions of Asian American abjection. The law also cannot undo the historical consequences and prejudices created by years of racial discrimination. Clearly different from the standard look of the nation and alien to its cultural origin, Asian Americans hold the position of formal nationals and cultural

aliens. Asian Americans therefore represent the contradiction of legal and cultural competences in contemporary American citizenship. Furthermore, being part of a nation burdened by ethnic contradictions, Asian Americans criticize national community and propose its reconstruction.

The question of one's identity is a complex issue. Is one to be identified by one's race, nationality, sex, class, occupation, residence, religion, age, and relationship to others? These are just some of the possible classifications. However, the most fundamental means of identification are the first two listed, and at the same time they seem to be the most problematic. Racial and nationality issues, having complex and multiple variations, are equally intriguing and challenging.

One of the first discussions over emerging Asian American identity concentrated on Stanley and Derald Sue's essay "Chinese-American Personality and Mental Health" (1971) which viewed Chinese Americans as products of various interplaying forces, among them traditional Chinese values, Western influences, and racism. According to the Sues, all Chinese Americans are caught in the conflict of these forces and they tend to be of three basic types, the "traditionalists", the "marginal man," and the "Asian American" (36-38). They define each of the previous types and explain that the traditionalist one is one who obeys parental expectations; the marginal man is one who discards ancestral culture to embrace Western ways; and the Asian American is one who rebels against both in search of a new self, of a new identity. Furthermore, the Sues claim that the problem with the traditionalist is that "Chinese patterns of deference and reserve" prevent the subject both from expressing his or her "personal feelings" to their elders and from "aggressively respond[ing] to racism" (38-39). The problem with the marginal man is that such a person "finds his self worth defined in terms of acceptance by Caucasians" and eventually "develop[s] a form of 'racial self hatred'" (40). The trouble with the Asian American is his "obsessive concern with racism" (43). Upon analyzing all three personality types, the Sues called for the individual to develop his or her "own conception of pride" (45).

The primary charge against the Sues' typology of personality was that internal factors override social forces. One of the most fierce critics of the Sues' reasoning was Ben Tong, who in "The Ghetto of the Mind" (1971) stated that the Sues' paradigm "fits squarely into the existing WASP-oriented psychotherapeutic frame of reference ... By insisting that Chinese-Americans take pride in living with these personality options," and he added that "our ethnic psychotherapists contribute to the maintenance of those very same stereotypes which they fear 'studies' and 'tests' are perpetuating (Tong, 3). Tong strongly disagrees with the Sues' proposal of adjustment, which he considers to exclude race as the constitutional device of American society and psyche. Moreover, he deems the pathology of the Asian American personality as the malady

of a historically perpetuated institutional racism whose cure requires “something of a radical political mature” (24).

Tong also makes other important observations in his work. He states that “Chinese American heritage” is not “synonymous with Great Traditions of Cathay” (4) since Chinese Americans are immigrant descendents of Cantonese peasantry who were peripheral to the high Chinese culture and their elitism and thus they do not necessarily inherit the “ascetic strains in Confucianism” and “unreacting expressionlessness” as the whites readily believe they always do (14). Tong claims that this image of “the meek and mild Chinaman” (8) is nothing but a façade or a survival mechanism that Chinese immigrants used to dignify their imposed silence and institutionalized repression throughout history. However, what early immigrants invented as an adaptive mask became a cultural trait for succeeding generations of U.S.-born Chinese Americans (14). In other words, Tong claims that Chinese American passivity is not the material manifestation of inherited Chinese traits but the product of American racism.

The disagreement between the Sues and Ben Tong is not only a discord between modes of coping and confrontation. It is at the same time a disagreement between the ethnic reformist whose model is Jewish assimilation and the ethnic revolutionary who is inspired by African American rebellion.

The confrontations of the Sues and Tong concerning the issues of identity are echoed in Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan’s essay “Racist Love” (1972). Chin and Chan write that “In terms of the utter lack of cultural distinction, the destruction of an organic sense of identity, the complete psychological and cultural subjugation of a race of people, [...] the people of Chinese and Japanese ancestry stand out as white racism’s only success” (66). They also believe that “[i]f the system works, the stereotypes assigned to the various races are accepted by the races themselves as reality, as fact and racist love reigns” (65), thus defining racist love as “a low maintenance engine of white supremacy” that conditions not only “the mass society’s perceptions” but also “the subject minority” itself into “becoming the stereotype, live it, talk it, embrace it, measure group and individual worth in its terms, and believe it” (66-67).

It seems that the 70s were an era of increased awareness of ethnicity and identity with Chinese Americans and this period was marked by a desire to establish their unique American identity. The prevailing sentiment was that it is possible to be both American and Asian and such belief was followed by Asian American efforts to establish an ethnic American identity and to challenge old stereotypes and myths about the Chinese in America. During a lecture at Stanford University, Chan stated that the Chinese American identity is yet to be defined. We only know what it is not: it is not European, and it is neither Chinese nor Afro-American. And in order to help it develop itself, we should, according to Chan, throw out what is Chinese and

what is white and then what is left will be Chinese American. Trying to explain the position of Chinese American identity Chin blames American racial policies for the fact that Chinese Americans have been taught that they have no history besides the white version of their history. According to Chin, the only cultural identity allowed has been a foreign Chinese one, which has been used to exclude Chinese Americans from American culture.

Furthermore, both Chin and Chan believe that the problem of Chinese American identity also lies in its schizophrenic model of “dual personality,” which seems to have its roots in orientalism.

The so-called “blending of East and West” divides the Chinese-American into two incompatible segments: (1) the *foreigner* whose status is dependent on his ability to be accepted by the white natives; and (2) the *handicapped native* who is taught that identification with his foreignness is the only way to “justify” his difference in skin color.... The privileged foreigner is the assimilable alien... posed as an exemplary minority against the bad example of the black [and] not the white majority as the single most potent threat to his status. The handicapped native is neither black nor white in a black and white world.... His pride is derived from the degree of his acceptance by the race of his choice at being consciously one thing and not the other (Chin and Chan, 1972: 72).

It seems that Chin and Chan detected that alienation and abjection are major problems that prevent the development of Asian American identity. However, they put most of their emphasis not on the notorious periods of legal exclusions, but rather on the period of post-World War II orientalism that was marked by increased tolerance since they believe that racist love determined Asian Americans as a manipulable and unviable subject of the nation. Determined to fight for a more visible and independent Asian American identity, Chin and Chan started to support the idea of the militant articulations of Asian American identity, envisioned upon the spirit of the black power movement. However, the outcome of this idea was an unfinished ideal of Asian American identity that was trying to find its articulation somewhere between the dichotomy of black and white, but that never happened.

Chin believes that the new Chinese American identity must be built around Chinese Americans as recognized members of American society, in other words as Americans. In order to achieve being recognized as American, it is mandatory to reject previous stereotypes and myths about quiet and submissive Chinese Americans who live in Chinatown ghettos.

Nonetheless, Chin and Chan’s inability to recognize the era of “racist love” as the beginning of legal equality appears to be marked by the desire to recover a lost ethnic cultural continuity and to negotiate the generational differences that create Asian American identity.

Chin and Chan continue their discussion of Asian American identity in their anthology of Asian American writers *Aiiiiieee!*

This myth of being either/or and the equally goofy concept of the dual personality haunted our lobes while our rejection by both Asian and white America proved we were neither one nor the other. Neither Asian culture nor American culture was equipped to define us except in the most superficial terms. (viii)

It seems that the authors of the anthology wanted to change the way Asian Americans were perceived and at the same time to define the outlines of a new Asian American culture that will effectively and reverently accommodate their condition of double exile and at the same time embody Asian Americans as proper U.S. subjects. In addition to creating a new ethnic space, this double negation also distinguishes between the “Asian American” and the “Americanized Asian.” However, the authors seem to forget that identity can be multiple, that experience can be fluid and that culture can change. I find their belief that the native-born is completely deprived of Asian culture utterly inaccurate, as we cannot completely isolate the Chinese or the American part of this experience. The same rule applies to both “Asian American” and “Americanized Asian.”

Similar questions of authentic Asian experience and identity occupy Chan, Chin, Inada and Wong in their second anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature, *The Big Aiiiiieee!* In this anthology they try to explain what, in their opinion, constitutes and represents real and authentic Asian American literature and identity. At the same time they seem to forget that they do not hold the key to the only possible version of the Asian American experience and that their sentiments and their experience may not correspond to the sentiments and experiences of other Asian Americans. This is especially true of Chinese American female writers whose representation was neglected in the past since it was believed that “women symbolize dependency – half- or ill-formed subjectivity” (Lee, 4).

The issue of Chinese American identity is a complex and diverse experience and there seem to be no unilateral answer to the question “What then is the [Chinese] American, this new man?” There is not only one, universal answer to what constitutes a Chinese American experience and Chinese American identity. At the same time, we need to remember that the Asian American identity is just one of numerous other American identities that create an overall American experience. There seems to be no final conclusion to this ever-changing issue of American identity as it has been a contested terrain since the very beginning of immigration to the United States. The motto “E Pluribus Unum” (from Many, One) still appears to be in use, although we

nowadays understand that final process may not be so unique and so permanent. Thus, the definition of American identity will continue to be changed and redefined as new immigrants and new ethnicities are accommodated in the United States. It seems that the process of creating the American identity is hardly over.

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**ISKUSTVO AMERIČKIH KINEZA I
„MELTING POT“****SAŽETAK**

Povijest SAD-a neupitno je povijest imigranata, a sastav američkog društva živi je dokaz imigracijske povijesti ove zemlje. Kako se razne etničke grupe šire i postaju brojnije i bolje zastupljene, očito je da njihova književnost postaje sve poznatija i priznatija. Namjera je ovoga članka pokazati da useljenici ne gube nužno svoj etnički identitet ziveći u SAD-u već često uspijevaju očuvati svoje originalne običaje i vjerovanja, ponekad ih prilagođavajući novoj sredini. Useljenici nastoje sačuvati vlastito kulturno i etničko naslijeđe kao i osobni identitet dok se prilagođavaju novoj sredini i standardu života. Kinesko-američko iskustvo prikazano u njihovoj književnosti posebno je zanimljivo budući su američki Kinezi kulturološki i fizički značajno drugačiji od dominantnog bjelačkog društva.

***Ključne riječi:** imigranti, multikulturalizam, identitet, društvo, SAD*