

The Two-level Construction of Asian Identity in American Born Chinese from a Third-space Perspective

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Abstract: This paper examines the film “American Born Chinese” through the lens of the “Third Space” theory, which focuses on the boundary areas between cultures. It explores how Asian characters in the film reconstruct their unique identity within the “Third Space” and why this film elicited different responses from Chinese and American audiences. The analysis shows that Chinese American characters face a dual otherness: being seen as “the other” by both American and Chinese cultures. The film adeptly combines traditional Chinese mythology to narrate the identity-building process of Chinese Americans, telling the story of their dual identity construction. However, it also conveys certain political unfriendliness towards China. The paper argues that Chinese-American film and television works can be seen as a form of “reflective literature,” highlighting the similarities, differences, and conflicts between two different cultures and value systems. By understanding the dual otherness of Chinese Americans, this study aims to promote cross-cultural understanding and mutual reflection between the East and West.

Keywords: American Born Chinese, Identity construction, Third-space, Post-colonialism.

1. Background

American films and television productions reflecting Chinese immigrant experiences primarily explore cultural conflicts between East and West within immigrant families, the confusion and construction of identity among two generations of immigrants, and their enduring popularity. In 2022, the production team of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* achieved great success at the Oscars, suggesting that the voices of Chinese Americans in film and television, as well as the underlying Chinese-American community, will be increasingly valued in the context of multiculturalism. This article attempts to examine, from the perspective of “the other” and using the “Third Space” theory, how Asian characters in *American Born Chinese* innovate and reconstruct their authentic and unique identity within the “Third Space,” and analyze why the film has elicited drastically different responses in China and the United States.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Other and the Third Space

“The other” is a common term in Western postcolonial theory, and “the other” and “the self” are a pair of relative concepts. Westerners view the non-Western world outside of “the self” as “the other,” setting the two in stark opposition. Thus, the concept of “the other” implicitly carries a Western-centric ideology [1].

Homi Bhabha, from the perspective of postcolonial cultural criticism, reexamines space and spatiality and finds that the traditional binary concept of space not only fails to explain the process, mechanisms, and results of cross-cultural communication, but also distorts the understanding of spatiality due to its insistence on hierarchical spatial order. Therefore, Homi Bhabha, based on the thoughts of several contemporary cultural critics, together with Lefebvre and Edward Soja, initiates a critique of the binary oppositional spatial system. Bhabha focuses on the “boundary” or “gap” areas between two or more cultures, discovering the reality of

cross-cultural communication—an inclusive space that transcends the binary concept of space, which he calls the Third Space [2]. The characters in *American Born Chinese* live in a multicultural American context, and due to their Asian identity, they are regarded as “the other,” experiencing a series of cultural conflicts. Through these conflicts, they construct the Third Space, ultimately building their self-identity.

2.2. Chinese American Identity Exploration and Construction

Wang Xiaohong [3] believes that Tingting Tang announces the political identity of Chinese Americans through *Tripmaster monkey: his fake book: America is now mine*. Chinese Americans construct their ethnic identity through the “construction of the Chinese American community” and the “conceptualization of the Chinese American subject.” Tang Jie [4] argues that *American Born Chinese* creates a fantasy space in the “Second World,” serving as the site for the reconstruction of Chinese American identity. Yao Ziyi and Deng Xiaohong [5] believe that *American Born Chinese* is a coming-of-age novel, going through stages of innocence, frustration, confusion, enlightenment, and maturity, ultimately forming the construction of the Chinese American identity. The aforementioned articles provide both writing patterns and theoretical inspiration for this paper. According to the analysis of the Chinese-American new diaspora films, Wang Yiwen argues that the contemporary notion of diaspora emphasizes the complex experience of living outside of one's homeland while being cut off from one's homeland [6]. *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Farewell to Tell Her* present a more open awareness of cultural negotiation. Compared with the traumatic experience, identity politics and cultural confrontation tendencies highlighted by the separation, the expressions of the two films obviously have more transcendental interaction space, suggesting the dynamic re-identification of Chinese identity in the context of globalization and the mainstream culture of the world [6].

3. Plot Analysis

This article only analyzes the story of the first season of *American Born Chinese*. The main storyline of the show is the coming-of-age tale of Wang Jin, a second-generation Chinese American exploring and reconstructing his identity. Simultaneously, the identity exploration story of the older generation with a Chinese cultural background serves as a secondary storyline intertwined with the main one. The story of the Asian sitcom actor Jamie follows a parallel storyline, and his changing identity awareness reveals the pursuits of the Chinese American community.

The Bull Demon and Sun Wukong were once inseparable brothers, but the former was marginalized by the Heaven due to his cowardice, while the latter gained recognition for exposing the hypocrisy of the immortals and became the sage that was highly respected by everyone. Although Wang Jin, as a second-generation Chinese American, experiences the same confusion and pain of the first generation in their search for identity, he grows up on the foundation of the first generation, striving for self-expression and individuality. At the same time, he subconsciously aspires to become a hero representing American freedom and democratic consciousness.

3.1. The first level of identification and construction of Chinese Americans identity – independence

In the early stages of the plot, Wang Jin even ignores the obvious racially discriminatory ridicule to join the football team. A Japanese student in the Cultural Society accuses Wang Jin of betraying his own cultural roots and stifling the voices of his ethnic group.

Wang Jin neither understands nor wants to understand the stories of gods and immortals in the *Journey to the West*. Despite the serious rebellion in the Heaven, he still puts his social life first and leaves Wei Chen on multiple occasions. At this stage, Wang Jin believes that his Chinese heritage draws unwanted attention from others. He wants to no longer be treated differently because of his race, but he is so eager for acceptance that he actively ignores the gaze of the “other.” He emphasizes his identity as an American and wants to integrate into the mainstream or the white social circle, warding off marginalization by abandoning his Chinese identity and passively resisting being othered.

However, in the subsequent development of the plot, Wang Jin’s views on his identity gradually waver. In his girlfriend Amelia’s home, he witnesses the reality hidden beneath the American free family relationships: under the façade of equality and democracy, American parents still harbor a desire for control. Through the process of reconciling his own parents’ tense relationship, Wang Jin gradually understands the rigid and heavy Chinese family relationships that he used to dismiss. Faced with the principal’s stereotype of Chinese family relations, Wang Jin’s father, who had always been silent, interrupts the principal’s smugness and sets the record straight for his culture. Through these experiences, Wang Jin gradually comes to accept and affirm his cultural heritage to some extent, rather than completely severing ties with it.

In this process, Wang Jin’s friends provide him with great assistance. Wei Chen, as a celestial being from the Heaven, opposes his father Sun Wukong’s discipline and is determined to build his own world. Wei Chen is a relatively simple and instrumental character with a pure spirit of resistance. He constantly encourages Wang Jin to express himself

confidently despite the mockery from the outside world. Instead of Wang Jin guiding Wei Chen on his journey to obtain scriptures, it is Wei Chen’s rebellious spirit that inspires Wang Jin to confidently express his long-suppressed thoughts and emotions, encouraging him to boldly pursue love and be true to himself.

Thus, Wang Jin eventually finds a solution to his struggle with his dual cultural identity: being himself does not mean abandoning his unique ethnic culture to blindly assimilate into the mainstream, nor does it mean fully returning to Chinese tradition. He realizes that he doesn’t have to be identified by his group identity but should live out his individuality and maintain an open and inclusive attitude towards both his native culture and American mainstream culture. By proactively finding his own balance between native culture and American mainstream culture and seizing the right to interpret his identity, Wang Jin can successfully break free from the “othering” gaze of American mainstream society and find the unique identity of a “Chinese American.”

3.2. Second level identity construction - the construction of hero identity

On the internet, a clip from a sitcom that aired twenty years ago goes viral on a short video platform. In the show, an Asian character, after saying the recurring line “What could go wrong?”, gets hit by a falling fan, accompanied by canned laughter in the background. Jamie, the comedian who played that character in the show, understands that the portrayal of the foolish Asian person actually carries strong racial stereotypes. Due to the renewed popularity of the sitcom, the creative team plans to produce a reunion episode, similar to the “Friends” reunion. Although Jamie has been trying to distance himself from this clownish role, he decides to attend the reunion. During the interview, the host and other actors engage in a conversation with Jamie about the recently trending clip. While they appear to be discussing comedic scenes, their language is laced with underlying racial discrimination. Jamie remains unaffected and calm, addressing the camera with composure about the injustices he has faced in the entertainment industry due to his ethnic identity. He is forever labeled as a comedian because of one experience playing the clown. In the end, he expresses the desire for Asian actors to also play heroic roles.

Through Wang Jin’s growth in the show, it highlights the voice of the Chinese American community in preserving their cultural uniqueness and opposing being “othered” or stigmatized. However, this identity construction is still based on actively integrating into the diverse American society, determined by their political identity as American citizens. Using Jamie’s response in the interview, the show expresses a second level of identity construction orientation for Chinese Americans - becoming heroes.

Becoming a hero means making achievements in society and receiving attention, recognition, and accolades. For Asian Americans, being recognized and fully accepted by American society means breaking away from the stereotype of being quietly exemplary and becoming heroes who make outstanding contributions to society. This allows them to no longer be viewed as outsiders due to their cultural background and ultimately fully integrate into American society.

To construct this hero image, the show introduces the cultural background of the *Journey to the West* and the gods from Chinese mythology. It assigns Wang Jin and Sun Wei Chen the task of saving the heaven and the mortal world

(mainly American society). Through various events, Wang Jin finds his true self and comprehends the content of the Fourth Volume of the Scriptures - the uniqueness of Chinese American individuals in the context of cultural fusion. Therefore, in the final battle, he uses this unique energy to thwart the Bull Demon's conspiracy, protecting the cherished American way of life and becoming a hero capable of saving America from crisis.

In the show, Wang Jin's self-discovery is aided by the powers of the gods, and his involvement in saving America is made possible through their intervention. On the surface, Sun Wei Chen represents the formidable power from China, but his and his father Sun Wukong's actions are not driven by obeying the orders of the Heaven but rather by their courage to oppose its dogmatism. Therefore, the assistance that comes from the heaven to help Wang Jin is not from powerful Chinese gods, but rather from a spirit of resistance against authority with clear American values. The scene in which the gods descend to aid the protagonist in completing the task implies that in reality, Chinese Americans still struggle with their identity construction and require external intervention, which comes from the recognition of American societal values.

3.3. Differences in Interpretation between Chinese and American Audiences Caused by Dual Other Identity

From the perspective of the concept of the other, the other is a symbol constructed by the subject to differentiate itself from other groups. To construct the other, we first need to determine who the subject is.

If the American society is seen as the subject, Chinese Americans occupy the position of the other. They carry the indelible imprint of Chinese culture, and because their original culture is so dominant, they are seen as alien to the primarily Western culture of the United States. Changes in the political landscape between China and the United States also affect how Chinese Americans are perceived in American society. When tensions arise between the two countries, the "Yellow Peril" theory is discussed again, and the image of both Chinese people and Chinese Americans is often inevitably interpreted from the perspective of the other or even as the enemy. Although Chinese Americans have severed their actual ties with China and are politically American, they are placed in the other category due to their Chinese cultural background. Therefore, Chinese Americans have long been seen as guests in the United States.

If Chinese culture is seen as the subject, Chinese Americans are also seen as the other in the eyes of the Chinese. From the perspective of Chinese culture, authenticity is an important criterion for evaluation. Chinese Americans carry cultural genes from China and are therefore naturally expected to preserve their original culture and use it as a standard and orthodoxy. In reality, Chinese Americans live in an environment completely different from that of mainland Chinese people, but because of their cultural background, they are still seen as an affiliate of the homeland. Therefore, when the culture of Chinese American communities differs from mainland Chinese culture, their behaviors are seen as betraying their original culture, making them the other who has disrupted the authenticity of the original culture.

The environment of Chinese Americans is like an enclave. Geographically located in the United States, they are isolated due to their strong Chinese cultural background and are

unable to integrate into mainstream society. China, thousands of kilometers away from the United States, claims cultural ownership over them.

From the above discussion, we can see that understanding the dual otherness of Chinese Americans is the key to explaining the controversy brought about by this drama. When audiences from both China and the United States view the show from their respective cultural perspectives, they will naturally come to polarized opinions.

In the eyes of American viewers, the TV series is first and foremost novel. In viewing Chinese culture as the other, they not only display a hostile attitude but also harbor a desire for this unfamiliar, imagined world. For example, the *Journey to the West* as one of the representatives of traditional Chinese elements adds an exotic visual effect to the film. The story of *Journey to the West* are unfamiliar to American viewers, who mostly regard it as a novel background setting and visual stimulus without understanding its mythological motifs. The spectacle created by Chinese mythology naturally appeals to this segment of the audience. Although this Orientalist perspective is unavoidable, the creators have not chosen to correct these interpretations through faithful adaptation of the original work. Instead, they have Americanized the characters of *Journey to the West* more thoroughly. This approach significantly reduces the viewing threshold for American audiences, making them more focused on the exploration of Chinese American identity and the portrayal of real-life social issues in the series.

For Chinese American viewers, they can interpret a large number of cultural symbols in the series. In their view, the film shows how the Chinese American community selectively acknowledges its cultural connection with their homeland and, through this selection, separates itself from Chinese culture, confirming its political identity as Americans.

As for why this film cannot satisfy Chinese audiences, the first reason is the difference in lifestyle habits between Chinese American characters and the culture of mainland China. At the same time, the portrayal of the *Journey to the West* mythology in the film can be seen as a metaphor, and the implied political image of China has also caused dissatisfaction among Chinese audiences.

Viewing other cultures from the perspective of one's own culture is a normal phenomenon, and the situation here is even more special. First, due to cultural similarities, Chinese audiences subconsciously tend to see Chinese Americans as compatriots and as representatives of Chinese culture. For example, when watching this drama, Chinese audiences expect a genuine *Journey to the West* story and hope to bring pure Chinese cultural output to American audiences. However, when they see the *Journey to the West* characters in the show need to practice English more and have the same behavior and appearance as Americans, Chinese audiences are very dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction stems from the belief that the show distorts the *Journey to the West*, a traditional Chinese treasure, as a cultural appropriation of Chinese culture. On the other hand, a deeper dissatisfaction is with the American values conveyed by the West's journey characters; the adventure story of pursuing the scriptures in the original work has become a backdrop for pursuing American freedom and realizing individualism's American story here.

Viewing Chinese Americans as others is a perspective of self, and there are reasons behind this view. In China, Han culture is the dominant culture of society, and unlike the racial melting pot found in the United States, Chinese audiences

naturally find it difficult to understand the dual otherness dilemma faced by Chinese Americans. When it comes to the identity dilemma faced by Chinese Americans, Chinese audiences often emphasize their Chinese cultural background and sneer at their political demands. They believe that Chinese Americans should turn to strong, profound Chinese culture, maintain the orthodoxy of Chinese culture forever, and not betray their roots and submit to America. Furthermore, because they cannot appreciate the reality of multicultural societies, Chinese audiences tend to hold contemptuous attitudes towards the diversification trend in American film and television in recent years. They believe that the success of Chinese films and television works is only due to the recent surge in political correctness, and that works like *American Born Chinese* are only catering to audiences by appropriating minority elements, rather than being genuinely outstanding works.

At the same time, the portrayal of the Heaven in this film, to a certain extent, hints at the contemporary political concept of China's image, which may also be one of the reasons for Chinese audiences' dissatisfaction. The film provides a detailed description of the centennial Divine Election held in the Heaven. Although it is a celestial palace, the internal arrangement is similar to a company's annual meeting held in a Chinese hotel. Deities are like officials of different levels following a strict hierarchical system, flattering their superiors and despising their subordinates. The Bull Demon King, as a representative of lower-level deities, cannot approach senior officials due to his position, so his suggestion to *Journey to the West* is never adopted. The purpose of the gathering is ostensibly for the deities to report on their work and select a new Great Sage, but in reality, everyone at the banquet is only concerned with boasting and flattering. Here, the Heaven is not the legendary fairyland but a corrupt bureaucracy, with deities portrayed as rigid, selfish, and petty individuals. This portrayal, to some extent, hints at American society's prejudice towards China's political system, reflecting the "otherized" image of China that has been imagined to shape American society's freedom and democracy. At the same time, the existence of the Heaven is, to a certain extent, like a dark cloud hanging over the United States. The celestial rebellion in the drama, although originating from China, causes catastrophic destruction on American soil. Although the show uses a lot of Chinese elements, the story of celestial strife from mainland China can hardly be said not to imply the threat of Chinese culture and political influences. In short, Chinese audiences cannot help but feel resentful when seeing these depictions of China that do not match their real-life perceptions.

4. Conclusion

America Born Chinese is a contemporary Chinese-

American film that makes breakthroughs in exploring the real-life issues faced by Chinese Americans, aligning with the political aspirations of the Chinese-American community striving for social discourse. It is worth noting that the drama aptly combines traditional Chinese mythology to narrate the identity-building process of Chinese Americans, telling the story of the dual identity construction of Chinese Americans and possibly providing broader narrative space for similar films in the future. While using *Journey to the West* elements, the film retains the Chinese cultural shell while replacing the American value system core, also conveying a certain inclination towards the China threat theory in its background setting. Although the film has a certain degree of misuse of Chinese culture and political unfriendliness, considering that its story is about Chinese Americans and its main target audience is American viewers, such treatment is understandable. This also means that the drama will inevitably have a severe polarized reputation between Chinese and American audiences. However, regardless of which side of the audience, we should not merely watch such film and television works with our subjective perspective. Chinese-American film and television works can be seen as a form of "reflective literature." Similarly, Chinese-American film and television works can also become a mirror for Chinese culture to recognize the "self" and "other," as they reflect the similarities, differences, and conflicts between two different cultures and value systems. This is an "extremely subtle" and strongly critical research perspective, which benefits us in mutually reflecting and enlightening each other's civilizations with people from "different lands."

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