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**Masculinities in the Chinese American
and the Korean American Novel**

Abstract

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Keywords

Chinese American, Korean American, Masculinities, Scholar, Hero, Hybrid Models, The Third Space, Nomadic Writing.

Abstract

The arrival of the big waves of Chinese immigrants in the 1850's and of Korean immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century made Americans from the middle and lower class worry for their jobs. This led the Americans to present Asians in a negative way by effeminizing them or by highlighting the danger of unmarried Asian men's presence on American soil as a cause for the increase in the number of Asian prostitutes in the United States. This negative image prompted the introduction of various legislative acts that reduced the rights of Asian immigrants, increased discrimination and the violence against the Asian immigrants. After World War II this situation was reversed. By the end of the twentieth century, the majority of the Asian immigrants managed to integrate in the American society and become recognized as model minority groups.

This historical situation is also reflected in literature. Until the 1980s, the majority of Asian American writers were women who portrayed their spouses as either effeminate or heroic, but patriarchal men. Afterwards, Frank Chin and other contemporary Asian American writers shifted from these old models towards two hybrid masculine typologies in their works, which combine both their Asian legacy and the American customs. These masculinities are primarily inspired by the Chinese Empire's scholar and hero models and they reflect the development of the successful Asian Americans, either as white-collar clerks or blue-collar workers.

In this context, the thesis¹ highlights how the Chinese American and Korean American authors used their novels to showcase not only the integration process of the Asian immigrants in the United States of America, but also the way in which the new hybrid masculinities create a unique third space through nomadic writing. This third space, as outlined by Homi Bhabha, enables the reader to encounter variations of the same masculine typology in each novel. At the same time, each individual character is unique

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due to their sociological characteristics. Through the representations of these masculinities, the reader is immersed into an international culture, not as an act of discovery of exotic cultures, but by understanding the globalization of the world.

In order to understand the importance of this shift in the Asian American novels from the old and negative perceptions towards a new and more positive perspective, the thesis examines the historical context. The first part shows the evolution of image of Chinese and Korean immigrants until World War II, when the Asian immigrants were described as undesirable aliens, due to the fact that they were hardworking individuals, who strove to make money for their families back in their mother countries. Despite their status as undesirable aliens, these Asian immigrants managed to shift from jobs such as gold mining, railroad-building, and agriculture, to jobs in factories, as blue-collar workers, or by entering businesses, such as small shops or dry cleaners. As the Chinese and Korean immigrants worked to sustain the American war effort during World War II, they were rewarded with the right to naturalize as American citizens. After obtaining the right to naturalize, more and more professional Asian immigrants came to America. Many Chinese Americans and Korean Americans shifted from owning small businesses towards more profitable ones, such as restaurants, clothing stores, beauty salons and so on, or oriented themselves towards white-collar jobs, such as teacher, professor, doctor, dentist, accountant, lawyer, administrative officer and so on. Although the majority of Americans perceive the two Asian American ethnic groups as model minorities, some Americans did not approve of this development and continued to accuse Chinese Americans and Korean Americans of stealing white American and African American jobs. This led to events such as the Los Angeles riots in 1992, in which Korean Americans were accused of taking an aggressive attitude towards African Americans.

After presenting the historical context, the thesis moves on to identifying the mainstream American masculine models. A deeper understanding of the hegemonic and marginalized masculine identities in the United States is necessary to better grasp the old and new Asian American masculinities. At the beginning of the colonization of America, the most important masculinity was the Puritan man. Afterwards, other hegemonic masculine models developed: the plantation owner who dominated over African slaves, the farmer owner who dominated over his family, the cowboy who dominated over his

subordinates and nature, and the adventurer who dominated over Native American nations. By the middle of the nineteenth-century, new models of masculinities developed due to the industrial revolution, such as the gold miner, the factory worker, the white-collar employee. In the twentieth century, as technological evolution continued, new masculine typologies appeared, like the muscle-man model, the hero who saves the world with the help of various gadgets and the cinematographic star model. By the end of the twentieth century, alongside the white American masculinities, the African American masculine model and the Jewish American masculine model were also recognized as positive models.

The African American and the Jewish American masculinity were recognized as hybrid constructions of masculine identity. The Americans of East Asian descent developed masculine typologies influenced by their East Asian heritage and were considered as hybrid typologies. In order to better understand these typologies, I have analyzed the two most important hegemonic masculinity types described by Kam Louie in his work *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity*, which had developed in the Chinese Empire and were adopted in Korean and Japan. The first masculine model is the hero, described in legends and stories as the outstanding male and good fellow, while the second one is the scholar, who can obtain wisdom, wealth, and a great administrative position. While the scholar embarks on the *wen* path journey, i.e. he learns the calligraphic traditions and the classical texts, the hero chooses the *wu* path and learns martial arts in order to fight, as well as show restraint. The Asian masculine models were used by many to achieve great fame throughout history and some Asian societies still impose these masculinities as the main models for the new generations. But these models, in their traditional forms, were insufficient for the Asian immigrants, in the opinion of Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, as the first Asian immigrants that tried to develop according to these typologies were perceived to be aliens due to their economic, moral, religious and social characteristics. Numerous laws were passed against them. In order to integrate in the American society, it was not enough to work hard or study hard, or just to be patient, a man needed to be daring, to be different, to fight for his rights, and to show off in order to become successful. This change of mentality in the Korean and Chinese immigrants happened only after War World II, when they were granted the right to naturalize and transformed from simple caretakers of their distant relatives into American citizens that needed to integrate in the United States.

This change of mentality and the betterment of their social status was not enough, as many Chinese American and Korean American authors continued to preserve the effeminate and patriarchal image of the Asian man in American ethnic literature. Only after the 1980s some authors, such as Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan, introduced two new Asian American masculine typologies in literature: the Asian American scholar and hero, which combine the traditional Chinese scholar and hero with the American models of masculinities. But not everyone approved of the new heroic model, Cheung King-kok criticized it as being too close to the traditional Chinese patriarchal model. Other critics, such as Merle Wo and Jachison Chan, argue that while their fathers had been discriminated in the United States, Asian American men should adapt to the gay model in order to integrate in America, rather than pursue the heroic one. After the 1990s, more and more writers with Chinese and Korean origins have posited in their works that they were not weak and effeminate men, but successful men who had to make a lot of sacrifices in order to settle down and obtain a good job in order to earn a decent living. Some Asian American writers continue to focus on depicting contemporary Asian American women in their novels to the detriment of the image of the men, as they thought that the women did not have enough representation in American literature.

Among the Asian American authors who used the hybrid scholar masculinity, the most successful were Gish Jen, Julie Wu, Chang-rae Lee and Susan Choi. In order to create this hybrid masculine model, the aforementioned authors used elements from the traditional *cáizǐ-jīārén* stories, as well as traits from the self-made American man model and the Jewish American typology.

In her novel, *Typical American*, Gish Jen describes two Chinese immigrants, Ralph Chang and Old Chao, who try to integrate in the United States as scholars. Both characters manage to obtain tenured positions in a technical university, but unlike Old Chao, who focuses on his job and pursuing marital bliss; Ralph Chang is not satisfied with his scholar status and wants to be a rich American like the con artist Grover. In the end, Ralph realizes that running a restaurant through money laundering and fraud is not the way to become an accomplished American and he returns to professorship.

Julie Wu's novel, *The Third Son*, follows the transformation of Tong Chia-lin/Saburo from a neglected young man from Taiwan, into a well appreciated scholar

in the United States of America. Saburo's develops through hard work and the strength to persevere when confronted with hardships. He is determined to offer a good life to his wife and child in America, which he could not do in Taiwan.

In Chang-rae Lee's novel, *Native Speaker*, Henry Park and John Kwang do not want to become scholars. They use their academic training in politics and the spy industry. In the end, Henry Park will understand that he does not have the mental fortitude to be a spy, renounces this path and embraces an academic career as a teaching assistant. Meanwhile, John Kwang, although he had obtained an administrative position, destroys his reputation by demonstrating how weak and corrupt he is, and ruins his potential political future in the American society. On a closer look, both main characters seem to have walked on the Asian scholar path, but as John Kwang aims to be part of the upper echelons of society, he becomes aware that he is like the corrupt administrative officer from *The Tale of Ch'unhyang*.

Ahn Chang from Susan Choi's novel, *The Foreign Student*, also transforms from a simple army translator into a scholar. He is confronted with various hardships, and manages to balance his love life with his academic one. Although he had a clear path in the beginning of the novel, i.e. finish his university studies while benefiting from a scholarship, he chooses the hard path, which meant he had to work while studying. But this sacrifice is worth it as he can marry Katherine Monroe.

Gish Jen, Julie Wu, Chang-rae Lee and Susan Choi introduced the hybrid Asian American scholar masculinity in a way similar not only to Jeffery Paul Chan, but also to Younghill Kang, a writer from the beginning of the twentieth century. Each one of the four writers creates an Asian American character from a different cultural, sociological, and temporal context. The only common cultural characteristic in all four works is the Confucian values, as Confucian ethics is the backbone of most East Asian societies.

Unlike the writers that portrayed the scholar masculinity, the authors that presented the heroic model focused on the characteristics of the Chinese and Korean heroes, on the way in which African Americans defy through words or actions when fighting for their rights, and on the Jewish American models. Gus Lee, Frank Chin, Marie G. Lee, and Sung

J. Woo are among the writers who successfully introduced this heroic masculine model in their works.

In Gus Lee's novel, *China Boy*, Kai Ting is transformed from a weak Chinese American boy, bullied by his African American neighbors, and beaten by his white stepmother, into an expert in fighting techniques. This transformation is due to his consistent and assiduous training at the Y.M.C.A., where he learns not only to fight, but also to know when to act and when not to act. He becomes a Chinese American hero by defending small children from bullies, such as Big Billie, and defying his stepmother's anti-Asian rules in order to become respected as an Asian American identity.

Frank Chin creates Donald Duk, a Chinese American boy who loves dancing and transforms into a heroic young man that defends his ethnic traditions and his ancestors. The novel does not include clear instances of violence, but it shows how Donald Duk becomes his great-great-grandfather in a dream. After observing the sacrifices made by the Chinese immigrants of his great-great-grandfather's generation, Donald changes from a weak and effeminate boy into a strong Asian American who defends his values. He champions his ethnic historical integrity even when confronted with the negative opinions held by his only friend, as well as his history teacher.

Chan Kim from Marie G. Lee's novel, *Necessary Roughness*, is a shy Korean American boy who moves with his family to a small town in Minnesota. Chan Kim becomes a local hero by helping his football team win the regional championship. Although his physical and strategic abilities are recognized by his friends and coach, other teammates envy him and in order to prove himself as a hero he must overcome several difficult moments. He is physically assaulted by his teammates, his sister dies, and his parents scold him for not being more Korean and less American. Finally, Chan Kim transforms from a boy into a man, and becomes the true image of a modern warrior hero who survived in the rough environment of a small town in the United States of America, where people still discriminate against other individuals on ethnic grounds.

Sung J. Woo's novel, *Everything Asian*, presents the transformation of David Kim, from a shy and weak boy into a hero that tried to enforce the true values of the Asian American masculine identity by defying his father and being fair and just in his actions. He

contrasts with his father, who is a depraved Korean American man that has an affair with another woman.

Gus Lee, Frank Chin, Marie G. Lee, and Sung J. Woo were inspired by both *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and the characteristics of the African American masculinities. In a similar way to the authors that used the hybrid Asian American scholar, these authors also introduced different cultural characteristics from their country of origin. The Chinese Americans used more cultural references, as the action of the Chinese American novels is placed in spaces where there are more Chinese Americans than other Americans.

The post 1980's Korean American and Chinese American authors are significantly different from their predecessors. The previous Asian American writers concentrated either on portraying Asian immigrant men as aliens who cannot assimilate in the United States because they used to be men that dominated and needed more than one woman in their life, or as exotic individuals. There is emphasis on their oriental diet – some critics equated what you ate to who you were. Unlike the old type of writers, the new generation of Asian American authors, which included: Gish Jen, Julie Wu, Chang-rae Lee, Susan Choi, Gus Lee, Frank Chin, Marie G. Lee and Sung J. Woo, tried to shift the focus from the presentation of the Asian immigrants as effeminate men or exotic individuals, towards integrated American citizens, who maintained their Asian identities. The Asian American men from the works of the new writers were portrayed as either successful scholars or heroic blue-collar workers. These masculine identities are the result of the original mix between elements of the two Chinese models, the self-made American man, African American male characteristics, and the Jewish American male model.

In the end, the thesis demonstrates that the new generation of Chinese American and Korean American authors managed to use the Asian American hybrid masculine models in order to show that Chinese American and Korean American men are not just white-collar or blue-collar workers, but proud members of the American society, who respect the American values and their own cultural heritage. Through the combination of the Asian masculine models with characteristics from other successful American ethnicities. These results are a variant of Homi Bhabha's third space. The new Asian American authors show that Chinese Americans and Korean Americans can integrate in the

American society. These hybrid models emphasize that Asian American authors are influenced by the globalization process, as they belong both to the Asian and the American culture, and this is a characteristic of the nomadic writing, as conceptualized by Rosi Braidotti.