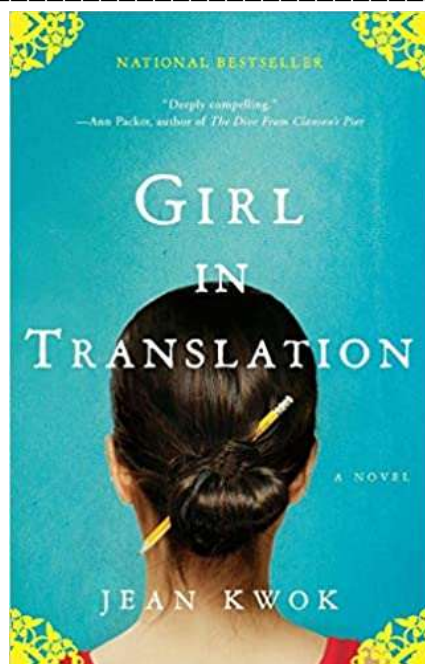


**Mediating Cultural Speed Breakers:
A Cultural Reading of Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation***

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Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Girl-Translation-Jean-Kwok/dp/1594485151/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Jean+Kwok+Girl+in+Translation&qid=1603237378&s=books&sr=1-1

Abstract

This paper will explore Jean Kwok's semi-autobiographical novel *Girl in Translation* that was published in the year 2010 along the lines of the second type of literary discourse since the novel's preoccupation is with a Chinese mother-daughter's mediation between Chinese cultural norms and the dominant culture of the host country, in this case, the United States of America, on their way to achieving success both with regard to integration and economic prosperity.

Keywords: Jean Kwok, *Girl in Translation*, Cultural Speed Breakers, Dominant culture, Ethnic hybridity, Struggle for identity

Jean Amato, in her introduction to her paper on “Relocating Notions of National and Ethnic Authenticity in Chinese American and Chinese Literary Theory through Nieh Hualing’s Overseas Chinese Novel, *Mulberry and Peach*” (1999) says that over the last three decades, “the study of Chinese American immigrant literature has proceeded in two separate geographically and historically determined directions. In the first, Chinese literary discourse, around overseas Chinese diasporic texts, has generally been preoccupied with themes of nostalgia, longing, and loyalty to a Chinese home land and culture. The second direction is concerned with the study and reception of Chinese immigrant texts in the United States where the methodology is mainly oriented towards domestic-centered representations of immigrant assimilation, the minority condition, and ethnic hybridity” (32).

A meeting of cultures inevitably occurs on immigration to another country and the receiving culture, most often the more dominant one, requires immigrants to adapt. For this to happen, the new arrivals would have to imbibe the aspects of the host culture to gain acceptance from the out-group. However, some might resist this in order to “emphasize the distinctive features of their own culture...” (Linton 1940: 513). Hence, acculturation, whether at the group or individual level is dependent on the degree to which people wish to maintain aspects of their original culture as well as the degree to which they want to maintain relationships with the outside groups (Sam and Berry, 2010). In the work under study, Chinese socio-historical factors intersect with American urban culture to shape the lives of the protagonists and the percentage of mixing that the protagonists permit themselves determines the extent to which they can be termed successful immigrants. The novel also provides scope to examine acculturation patterns in two different generations for during the process, and in line with Nauck’s (2008) findings, every group and every individual changes differently in spite of possessing the same cultural origin and living within the same acculturative space.

Girl in Translation (2010) has, as its central protagonists a mother and daughter duo – Mrs. Chang (Ma) and Kim who are sponsored to America from Hong Kong by Mrs. Chang’s sister, Paula. Originally from mainland China, Mrs. Chang and her sister were shipped out by their parents to the safety of Hong Kong and away from the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution. Mrs. Chang continued her education in Hong Kong while Aunt Paula worked to support her. Eventually Aunt Paula married a Chinese American and moved to America and then worked on sponsoring her sister Mrs. Chang who was by that time a widow with a daughter, to join her and her family. Mrs. Chang and Kim’s move was impeded twice because the former had to be first cured of tuberculosis before they could gain entry to the U.S.A. Mrs. Chang made the decision to relocate in order to escape living in China under impending Communist Chinese Rule and also to join the only family she had left. She tells Kim, “The road we could follow in Hong Kong was a dead one. The only future I could see for us, for you, was here, where you could become whatever you wanted” (*Girl in Translation*, 21). Aunt Paula had decided what they were to do

once they landed – Mrs. Chang would help care for Aunt Paula’s sons while the parents worked at their garment factory and Kim would go to school.

With their futures chalked out for them, Mrs. Chang and Kim make the move only to be rudely shocked by the alternate arrangements made by Aunt Paula on their arrival. The sisterly concern that had earlier marked the relationship between Mrs. Chang and Aunt Paula had all but disappeared to be replaced with a materialism and self-centeredness on the part of the latter. Mrs. Chang’s recent illness had worked against her for her sister no longer wanted to shelter her under her own roof. Instead, within a week of their arrival they were abruptly shunted out and dumped before a run-down, roach-infested apartment building with no heating in an unsafe neighbourhood in Brooklyn. Mrs. Chang was to report daily for work in her sister’s garment factory and Kim would go to a school a distance away from their residence. Every month, a certain percentage of Mrs. Chang’s wages would be deducted to repay the expense incurred in bringing her and her daughter to America. Thus, begun their new life in America, down a road which looked endless and bleak, but which would have to be trod, each step determined solely on individual initiative and a will to succeed.

Life is arduous. Kim has to find her feet in a school environment that is alien since she possesses only a limited knowledge of English which precludes her, at least initially, from understanding her classes, as well as making friends. Mrs. Chang slogs long hours at the sweatshop and Kim has to help her finish work in the evenings in order for her mother to be paid enough for them to just survive. Mrs. Chang, however, has only one objective in life and that is to ensure that Kim becomes successful in America and she reasons that the best way to do that is to excel in academics. Social researchers, Costigan and Dokis (2006), endorsing the opinions of earlier researchers, state, “Academic achievement is highly valued in Chinese families, and immigrant Chinese parents likely emphasize academic achievement more than peers in the host culture” (1254). This becomes particularly pertinent in the lives of the mother and the daughter for Mrs. Chang recognizes that Kim is an exceptionally brilliant child and reminds her that she was “the smartest student our primary school in Hong Kong had ever seen. Nothing can change how bright you are, whether your current teacher knows it or not. Most important, nobody can change who you are, except for you” (*Girl in Translation*, 48).

Respite from the new environment is found in two places – the home, despite its dismal condition and the sweatshop in Chinatown. Glick (2010) observes, “To instil ethnic identity from their own national origins, parents used traditions, food and religious practices” (504). The Chang home is infused with its own individuality and culture. Things are arranged in accordance with *Feng Shui* principles, the *Tong Sing* (The Chinese Almanac) finds a place at the head of the mattress, five altars are set up in the kitchen in honour of the earth god, the ancestors, the heavens, the kitchen god and Kuan Yin, the goddess of compassion. When they are ill, Mrs.

Chang buys medicines – “deer antlers, crushed crickets, octopus tentacles, human-shaped roots” (*Girl in Translation*, 57) from a Chinese shop. At Chinese festival times, Mrs. Chang makes “... traditional yellow steamed pastries and a vegetarian monk’s meal for lunch” (*Girl in Translation*, 77), they visit the Shaolin temple to worship in Chinatown and offer food and incense at the altars of their five gods. When the evil eye is to be averted, they break china plates as was done back home in China. The other context of familiarity is Chinatown and the sweatshop there. Chinatown with its Chinese shops selling Chinese food and the scores of Chinese immigrants milling around evokes the feeling of being back home in Hong Kong.

The sweatshop itself is populated only with female Chinese workers and their children. To summarize Loo and Ong (1982), Chinese cultural norms function to deny women independence and a good education and the case is especially true when the girls hail from poor economic backgrounds. When such families immigrate to America, they inevitably drift into Chinatown and the women end up seeking employment in the areas very many sweat factories or restaurants to supplement their husbands’ meagre income. The presence of children at the factories is more a norm than an exception because although “they weren’t officially employed by the factory, ... there was no place else for them to go, and their parents needed their help ...the work that the children did was essential to the family income” (*Girl in Translation*, 35). It was at this place that Kim makes friends with other Chinese children but Mrs. Chang, a fairly educated woman herself, from a different socio-economic background back home, now caught in a web of poverty and debt, cautions Kim against becoming too involved with them. “Don’t get too close to the other children here...If you play with them, learn to talk like them, study like them, act like them – what will make you different? Nothing. And in ten or twenty years, you’ll be doing precisely what the older girls are doing, working on the sewing machines in this factory till you’re worn...” (*Girl in Translation*, 47-48). She is aware that their only way out of their miserable situation is through Kim and away from the present milieu of unambitious co-workers. Kim too understands her goal and despite hardships at school brought on through cultural incompatibility decides that she has to succeed in academics. Costigan and Dokis (2006), consolidating the views of Fulgini (1997) and Zhou et al. (2003) observe, “...academic success is a primary pathway for immigrant youth to advance in society and academic achievement is an important way in which Chinese children fulfil family obligations and enhance family pride” (1254).

Kim’s childhood and teenage years remain splintered in ways that it would not have been had she continued to live in Hong Kong. In America, she begins to live multiple existences at one and the same time –a student in an English school, a part-time worker in a sweat shop and a Chinese immigrant in her home. Her immigrant consciousness is fragmented as she juggles multiple social, cultural, and national identities making her like no other American boy or girl her age. Her path to intended success is also variegated for she realizes that there are multiple

options and not all that conform to an ideal American existence or that might be taken without making personal sacrifices. Despite the conundrum of her multiple existences Kim is without self-pity or bitterness. When life gets difficult at school, primarily because of her lack of fluency in English and the cultural contexts in which the language is employed sometimes making her the laughingstock of the class, she is determined to work harder. Then, there is always the familiarity of Chinatown and friendships within the sweatshop that she takes comfort in since it is a familiar world, the rules of which she knows.

Language is one important feature that either aids or impedes the acculturation process. Mrs. Chang's English skills are so basic that she can neither help Kim with her studies nor pass the U.S. citizenship exam to qualify them for citizenship which was required if Kim were to avail of financial aid for her higher education. The older woman's long working hours, her associations confined mainly to people from her own ethnic background and absolutely no social life greatly limited her exposure to American society and its influences. Hence, Kim had to compensate for her mother's limitations despite her own. Summarizing earlier research Glick (2010) states, "children play active roles in the acculturation process for the family as a whole ...children served as important connections between immigrant families and the receiving society by translating and interpreting for parents and other family members" (505). On arrival at Aunt Paula's house for the very first time, Mrs. Chang tells her sister, "Ah-Kim hardly speaks any English at all" (*Girl in Translation*, 12) but it is with this very little English that Kim has to take her mother and herself through life in American society and at school. The need to help her mother at work after school hours meant the inability to socialize with her peers in the evenings which would have speeded up her acquisition of the language. In high school, she receives extra coaching from a senior yet "the combination of the kids' use of slang and (her) lack of culture context made their discussions bewildering" (*Girl in Translation*, 145).

A quicker acculturation with mainstream culture was also stalled by instances of ethnic value that they employed in their relationship with others that defined who they were, but which were sometimes at odds with the larger culture. Mrs. Chang did not permit Kim to visit the homes of her school friends for she said they would have to return the courtesy which they could ill afford. "Ah-Kim, if you go too many times to her (a friend) house. we will have to invite her back to ours one day and then what? Little heart's stem, we already have too many debts we can't repay" (*Girl in Translation* , 69). At Christmas, they were introduced to the concept of gift-giving and Mrs. Chang expects Kim's gift from her one special friend Annette to be more quantitative than qualitative; on par with what they had got Annette, and hence, was disappointed with the present of a little toy that was meant to be hung to the straps of a school bag. Poverty is another stumbling block that prevents easier integration. After gaining admission to the prestigious Harrison Prep, Kim finds herself ill at ease among the other affluent students. "If they knew that Ma made even my underwear for me, that we slept under pieces of fabric we'd

found in the trash, they would surely throw me out” (*Girl in Translation*, 99). Her inability to dress like the others makes her the butt of many a cruel joke and she keeps from making friends convincing herself that she had no time to spend with them since she had to help her mother out at the factory. “I gave myself the excuse of not even trying to get close to the others because I know I couldn’t be part of their lives. I still had my responsibilities at the factory, but even without that, Ma wouldn’t have allowed me to go out anyway. That wasn’t what nice Chinese girls from her background did” (*Girl in Translation*, 147). However, the excuse was partly true because her cultural upbringing that stressed on shared responsibility and having to help her mother served the two-fold purpose of supplementing the family income as well as avoiding socialization because of perceived inadequacies.

Despite the speed bumps that lower the speed of Kim’s process of acculturation, she also begins to imbibe an assertive and self-dependent spirit – the tenets on which the New World was founded and the attributes required to make a success of oneself. These qualities first come through at Harrison Prep where she is once accused wrongly of cheating and has to face an enquiry. She defends herself saying, “I am too smart to cheat ... It’s under me” (*Girl in Translation*, 152). She is vindicated when after being put through a test, the teachers realize that with such brilliance, cheating is a non sequitur. Her achievements at school give her great comfort and confidence, “...the scientific world created a clear and logical paradise where I could feel safe. Just for pleasure, I had started reading library books about subjects we’d touched upon in school ... And mathematics was the only language I truly understood. It was pure, orderly and predictable” (*Girl in Translation*, 174), and again, “School was my only ticket out and just being in this privileged school wasn’t enough; I still needed to win a full scholarship to a prestigious college, and to excel there enough to get a good job” (*Girl in Translation*, 198). If she could do this, she could get both, her mother and herself, out of their bonded existences.

Determined to get ahead in life, Kim has to inevitably make sacrifices. She foregoes a lot of childhood pleasures, both by choice and by circumstance, making her journey tragically beautiful. At college, “(She) kept a deliberate distance from the other girls...(She) already snuck off once in a while to see Annette; (she) couldn’t fit anyone else in” (*Girl in Translation*, 199). With Annette “(she) enjoyed pretending to have more of a normal life...It allowed (her) the luxury of imagining (she) was richer and better off than (she) actually was” (*Girl in Translation*, 199). On a deeper and altogether different personal level, she gives up on a more permanent relationship with her Chinese sweatshop friend Matt Wu. Her strong desire to achieve her goal pulls her away from what a normal girl of her age would want to experience: “My feelings were so intense that I associated being close to him with a tightness in my breathing. I was always careful to preserve the space between us ... I think I was afraid that if the distance between us were bridged, I would be swept away from all I had worked for, everything that I was” (*Girl in Translation*, 201). Her inhibitions send Matt into the arms of Vivian and while their relationship

causes intense distress in Kim, it also highlights the extent of her will power. It also has a liberating effect whereby, she is able to associate on a more confident level with the boys in her class, especially Curt, and is surprised to find that they actually like her in return. Her newfound confidence emboldens her and to Sheryl's jealous remark of "What in the world can (Curt) possibly see in (Kim)? She retorts, "Brains are beautiful" (*Girl in Translation*, 235).

Despite trying to keep each other at arm's distance, Matt and Kim have not got over each other and consummate their relationship. Both are aware that though there is a strong physical attraction, and they love each other, they were on two completely different mental plains. Matt realizes that Kim is destined for higher things and admits, "I am not like you Kimberly. I'm just a stupid guy. I'm not some hero from a kung fu movie come to save you from your life" (*Girl in Translation*, 252). In a reversal of traditional Chinese gender roles Kim replies "You don't need to rescue us. I'm going to do it." (*Girl in Translation*, 252). Matt, however, insists on the conventional norms of the man being the provider and replies sadly, "I want to take care of you Kimberly, not the other way around. That's how it should be" (*Girl in Translation*, 267). Despite her love for Matt, Kim is not willing to give up the prospects of a brilliant future; a future she and her mother had dreamed of during their long years of drudgery. The deep sense of survival which had ingrained itself into her very psyche and had helped her endure years of hardship helps her harden her heart when it comes to Matt as well.

Years later, Matt and Kim meet again. Kim is now a successful paediatric surgeon and Matt brings his child to her for consultation. In their conversation, Matt tells Kim that she might have been better off as a home maker rather than having to work so hard to get to where she is today. Matt is still unable to understand Kim's need to prove herself in America. He hints that they might have made it as a couple only if she hadn't been so determined to go her own way but Kim, despite misgivings over the relationship, states matter-of-factly, "I had an obligation to Ma and to myself. I couldn't have changed who I was. I wish I could have. Sometimes I wish I had... But I wouldn't have been happy on your journey, and I know you wouldn't have been happy on mine" (*Girl in Translation*, 282). However, it would be a mistake to use this statement of Kim's to categorize her as a feminist fighting for her rightful place in the New World or as being a hard hearted materialist. She is a complex web of emotions, attitudes and ambitions shaped by exploitation, poverty and multiple identities which she amalgamates to emerge into the successful and confident woman that she had always intended to be; personal happiness with the man she loves being forfeited as collateral damage.

While immigrant literature often deals with the characters being in conflict with the culture of the host land, Kim and her mother are not seen to be at odds with American culture in their journey towards assimilation. Mrs. Chang, for several years, was bound to Chinese culture because of her constrained living conditions which denied her exposure to the American way of

life. She was also resistant to the little that she knew, not because she wanted to preserve her home culture, but because she feared that adapting to it put further strain on their extremely meager finances. Hence, Mrs. Chang is prevented from successful integration not out of any personal reason but by circumstances beyond her control. Once Kim becomes successful there is every possibility of Mrs. Chang associating herself much more freely with larger society leading to a far better integrated life because, despite her financial constraint, she always showed a progressiveness of mind. Kim's integration into American society takes place in a measured way. Hindered by poverty and restricted rules of socialization her process is slow but nevertheless, sure. Her experiences in school and later on in college together with her own determination and will to succeed help her to ultimately inhabit a comfortable third space between two cultures which is the ideal integration strategy.

A reading of immigrant literature, and particularly those involving young characters, presents intimate and personal dimensions together with the universal predicament of the child maturing into adolescence and then adulthood and coming to term with an entirely new culture and ways of existence at every stage of evolving. Without these personal stories, immigrant literature would be bereft of alternative voices that serve to present, strengthen and consolidate the pluralistic nature of the countries that welcome immigrants. A socio-cultural reading also serves to negate the rather ubiquitous idea that immigrants are a race of people driven out of their homeland who arrive in new countries, work hard, assimilate into the new culture and achieve material success without simultaneously taking into account the range of others factors – personal, social, cultural - that intersect with the materialist drive for a better way of life.

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