

University of Pardubice
Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

The Depiction of Cultural Identity and Cultural Assimilation in Gish Jen's
Mona in the Promised Land

Bachelor Thesis

Univerzita Pardubice
Fakulta filozofická
Akademický rok: 2022/2023

ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

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Studijní program: **B0231A090018 Anglický jazyk**
Specializace: **Anglický jazyk pro odbornou praxi**
Téma práce: **Identity and Assimilation in Mona in the Promised Land by Gish Jen**
Zadávající katedra: **Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky**

Zásady pro vypracování

Bakalářská práce se věnovat románu čínsko-americké autorky Gish Jen(ové) *Mona in the Promised Land*. V úvodu práce studentka stručně nastíní literárně-historický kontext díla, zařadí jej do souvislostí čínsko-americké (asijsko-americké) literatury a žánru. S využitím relevantní odborné literatury bude definovat pojmy a koncepty, s nimiž bude pracovat (etnicita, asimilace, second-generation, ap.) Jádrem práce bude analýza zvoleného díla, v níž se studentka zaměří na způsoby zobrazení imigrace, asimilace, akulturace, předávání a přetváření (etnické, kulturní, jazykové, náboženské) identity, případně otázky dospívání. Své analýzy shrne a vysloví obecnější závěry o přístupech Jenové k daným tématům.

Rozsah pracovní zprávy:

Rozsah grafických prací:

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**

Jazyk zpracování: **Angličtina**

Seznam doporučené literatury:

1. Bubíková, Šárka. 2008. *Literary childhoods: growing up in British and American literature*. Tahy, sv. 2. Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart.
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Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **31. března 2023**

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **1. dubna 2024**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my supervisor doc. Mgr. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D., for her helpful advice and care.

Many thanks belong to my family and friends for their support.

ANNOTATION

This bachelor thesis explores the theme of identity and assimilation in the novel *Mona in the Promised Land* by Chinese-American author Gish Jen. It mainly focuses on the main character, Mona, who cannot find her true identity because she is both Chinese and American. Overall, the work deals with the search for true identity, whether religious or cultural and the obstacles that come with this process.

KEYWORDS

Identity, assimilation, immigration, religion, Chinese-American literature, Gish Jen

NÁZEV

Znázornění kulturní identity a asimilace v románu *Mona in the Promised Land* od autorky Gish Jenové

ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tématem identity a asimilace v románu *Mona in the Promised Land* od čínsko-americké autorky Gish Jenové. Zaměřuje se hlavně na hlavní postavu Monu, která není schopna najít svoji pravou identitu, protože je jak Číňanka, tak Američanka. Celkově se práce zabývá hledáním pravé identity, ať už náboženské nebo kulturní, a s překážkami, které s tímto procesem přicházejí.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Identita, asimilace, imigrace, náboženství, americko-čínská literatura, Gish Jen

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Introduction

The quest for identity is a challenging task. This paper deals with finding a person's true identity with the intention of analysing the novel *Mona in the Promised Land* by Gish Jen. The paper's central themes are assimilation, immigration and a quest for identity. The first part provides information about historical and cultural background. The second part analyses the novel *Mona in the Promised Land*.

The first chapter provides information about assimilation and immigration. It states the most common reasons for migration and other matters of immigration. Concerning assimilation, the paper provides information about four types of assimilation in addition to the history of Chinese migration. The following parts differentiate first and second-generation immigrants.

In the next chapter, the thesis provides brief information about the metaphor "Melting pot." Followed by other literary works of the author Gish Jen. As mentioned, the practical part of the paper focuses on the novel *Mona in the Promised Land*, especially on the main character, Mona. Mona's friends and family significantly contribute to shaping her identity as a Chinese American girl living in the United States of America as a second-generation immigrant. The paper analyses the main character's perception of identity, assimilation, religion and cultural heritage. Mona's parents expect her to act according to Chinese values, which results in her not fitting into either category – Chinese or American. Additionally, After Mona's conversion, she faces difficulties as a Chinese-American Jew.

In the following chapter, the paper uses primary and secondary sources to analyse identity in the novel. It deals with ethnic, religious, cultural and racial identity, which all Mona fails to find. Next, it deals with how different parenting in the United States of America is compared to the one in China.

Finally, the thesis depicts cultural assimilation in the novel. It focuses on Helen and Ralph's behaviour in American society, especially how they attempt to assimilate but are not able to completely. It explains the reasons for this type of behaviour. And lastly, it depicts the main character's view on assimilation.

1 Immigration and Cultural Assimilation

“Immigration is the process of moving to a new country or region with the intention of staying and living there.”¹

Immigration is a complex term that explains why and how people move from one country to another. People who migrate into another country, in other words “Immigrants”, often have severe reasons to leave their home country, such as social and political changes, unpleasant war conditions or economic hardships.² However, people occasionally migrate solely because they want to pursue either work or life opportunities without any life-threatening reasons. These are called “the push and pull factors”, which will be elaborated on later in the work.

Until 1875, the possibility of immigration to the United States was practically unopposed. The former and first president of the United States, George Washington, ensured that immigrants could freely enter the American land. In fact, the California Gold Rush in 1848 ensured the most significant wave of male immigrants, including the Chinese.³ However, Washington’s noble act did not last for long. In 1882 and 1884, The Chinese Exclusion Acts, being the first enforced act against a particular ethnic group, stripped the Chinese of the opportunity to gain US citizenship. Meanwhile, the Chinese could only enter the land by properly incorporating into social groups. It took approximately 60 years for the United States to revoke these acts.⁴

The year 1848 was as important for the Chinese as it was for the Americans. The year 1848 started a “gold fever” as the discovery of gold happened in Sacramento, California. The Americans were so thrilled by the founding that they all immediately left everything behind in the vision of fortune and a better future.⁵ The miraculous news soon got to the media and circled the entire world, resulting in many immigrants coming to California to get rich and return to their homeland. As Chan claims, there is no way to determine when exactly the “gold fever” hit China. However, it was probably around later in 1848.⁶ A few Chinese have fallen for this “gold craze”; however, not enough to create

¹ “United States Immigration,” *National Geographic*, accessed November 29, 2023, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/resource-library-united-states-immigration/>.

² Kay Deaux, *To Be an Immigrant* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 13.

³ Ralph J. Roske, “The World Impact of the California Gold Rush 1849-1857.”, *Arizona and the West*, vol. 5, no. 3, (1963): 188.

⁴ Deaux, *To Be an Immigrant*, 14.

⁵ Marian. Hamilton, “California Gold-Rush English.”, *American Speech*, vol. 7, no. 6, (1932): 423.

⁶ Sucheng Chan, “A People of Exceptional Character: Ethnic Diversity, Nativism, and Racism in the California Gold Rush.”, *California History*, vol. 79, no. 2, (2000): 56.

mass immigration. It was after 1850 that more Chinese started to migrate to the United States due to the Taiping revolt.⁷ As mentioned before, most immigrants participating in the “digging” were men.⁸ As Roske suggests, this claim might stem from the fact that Chinese women, most frequently wives of the men who came to the digging, were forbidden to enter the country.⁹ Roske points out that at first, the Chinese migrants were welcomed with open arms; nevertheless, after the year 1852, when the flow of Chinese reached 20,000 immigrants, their position in American society began to degrade.¹⁰

There are two different stages of immigration, one that we call the first generation and the second generation. The main difference between first and second-generation immigrants is based on the fact that first-generation immigrants are those born outside of their host country - the United States of America. Meanwhile, the second generation of immigrants are the children of the first generation who were born in their host country.

At some point in their life, the first generation decided to move out of their home country and start a new life in another country. This decision might be based on various reasons, e.g. political or financial. In case they had a child that immigrated with them that was born in their home country, this child would be labelled as a 1.5-generation immigrant because the child is not entirely the first nor the second-generation immigrant. However, that only applies if the child is still very young.¹¹

The definition of the second generation may vary, as there are theoretical questions concerning how to define a person that is indeed a second-generation immigrant, based on the age that they came to the country, ethnic identity formation, the shift of mother tongue, or how their persona will evolve regarding their native culture.¹² Additionally, a child or an adult must have at least one parent born outside the host country to be labelled a second-generation immigrant.¹³

⁷ Roske, “The World Impact of the California Gold Rush 1849-1857.”, 197.

⁸ Roske, “The World Impact of the California Gold Rush 1849-1857.”, 188.

⁹ Roske, “The World Impact of the California Gold Rush 1849-1857.”, 197.

¹⁰ Roske, “The World Impact of the California Gold Rush 1849-1857.”, 198.

¹¹ “First and Second Generation,” Immigration Initiative at Harvard, accessed November 29, 2023, <https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/topic/first-and-second-generation/>.

¹² Ruben G. Rumbaut, “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States,” *International Migration Review* (2004): 1161.

¹³ S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, “Second-Generation Immigrants? The ‘2.5 Generation’ in the United States,” *Social Science Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (April 2004): 380-399.

Immigrants can be categorized into four distinct groups based on the level of connection to the culture of the host country. First, some remain loyal to the culture of their country of origin and do not participate in their host country's customs and traditions. They are called the group of "separation". Second, the group of "marginalization" does not identify with either the culture of their host country or the country of origin. Third, "integration" signifies being fond of both cultures, meaning that immigrants are actively engaging in the traditions and customs of their host country as well as their home country. Lastly, "assimilation" is the process of slowly forgetting the traditions of their country of origin and embracing activities and traditions typical for their host country.¹⁴ In other words, cultural assimilation means that immigrants start to resemble people from the host country. They adapt entirely, speak the language fluently, follow the laws and social norms and practice its customs and traditions.¹⁵ Assimilation gets stronger with each generation of immigrants. The first generation of immigrants retains most of the traditions of their parents. However, with each generation, the culture starts to fade gradually. By the third generation, immigrants may even assimilate entirely into their host country's culture. Furthermore, the younger immigrants find it easier to assimilate than their older counterparts.

Additionally, the so-called push and pull factors of migration are terms used to describe reasons for people's migration. Push factors include aspects that push people away from their country. This might be famine, ongoing war, natural disasters, gender or other inequality or political situation (e.g. a new political party or an extreme political movement). Those issues result in people having to leave the country in order to live a proper life. On the other hand, pull factors draw people in. Pull factors make the country more inviting because of work opportunities, health care, higher education, a better economy or a safer community. However, in usual circumstances, there is standardly a mixture of both push and pull factors.¹⁶

A recent research conducted in a Chinese community living in the USA (specifically in the San Francisco Bay Area) has shown various reasons for Chinese migration. Firstly, the main reason for many Chinese immigrants was to join relatives

¹⁴ Viola Angelini, Laura Casi, Luca Corazzini. "Life Satisfaction of Immigrants: Does Cultural Assimilation Matter?" *Springer Link*, March 17, 2015.

¹⁵ Henri Bunle. "The Cultural Assimilation of Immigrants." *Population Studies* 3 (1950): 5-11.

¹⁶ "Push or Pull Factors: What Drives Central American Migrants to the U.S.?" National Immigration Forum, published July 23, 2019, <https://immigrationforum.org/article/push-or-pull-factors-what-drives-central-american-migrants-to-the-u-s/>.

already living in the USA. Secondly, Chinese people were curious about the standard of living in the USA. And to many, it seemed like there were better job opportunities for them and their children's education. Therefore, the reason for migration is better work opportunities, higher income, and more advanced education for children and even adults who want to improve. The next reason is unwilling migration, which would consider people who were brought to the USA by their parents as young children who had no say in this matter. This considers people who migrated because they wanted to get married willingly or were pressured by their parents. Lastly, the purpose of migration for many was to start a new life and leave the old one behind due to political or personal issues.¹⁷

In theory, cultural assimilation can offer immigrants more reassurance, expanded job opportunities or different social status. That is because people of the host country might not fully understand the culture of immigrants, which can even lead to discrimination.¹⁸

¹⁷ Xinyue Wang, Stephanie L. Haft, and Qing Zhou. "Reasons for Migration, Post-Migration Sociocultural Characteristics, and Parenting Styles of Chinese American Immigrant Families." *Children* 10, no. 4 (2023): 612 <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2806502983/ECE3B5DE5AD14E5DPQ/2?accountid=17239>.

¹⁸ Emmaline Soken-Huberty. "What Is Cultural Assimilation?" *Human Rights Carees*, accessed November 5, 2023.

2 Cultural and Historical Background

The term “melting pot” became popular after Israel Zangwill presented his play *The Melting-Pot* in 1908. It is one of the possibilities of a view on assimilation. The term melting pot became famous because of the massive wave of migration between 1900 and World War I.¹⁹

Melting pot metaphor refers to a situation where all the different nations living in the same country, in this case, the United States of America, will melt together. That means that all the immigrants are immersed into American society and form a new united nation that has never been seen before. They leave their individuality aside and become fully assimilated with the rest of American society.²⁰

Already, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s “Letters from an American Farmer” also mentioned this issue in 1782 with his famous letter “What Is an American?” He did not specifically mention the term melting pot, but in this letter, he emphasises the concept of a new man, the man of a new race (a mixture of Swedes, Dutch, French, Irish, Scotch and Englishmen) who came to America to create something new.²¹

Similarly, Former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt gives another perspective on immigration. It concerns his speech on Columbus Day in 1915 to the Irish Catholic Knights of Columbus at Carnegie Hall about hyphenated Americans. This speech is often misunderstood by people who are anti-immigration. However, in 1915, this speech was pro-immigration, and Theodore Roosevelt was seen as a supporter who wanted immigrants to come to the USA. In his speech, he explained how identifying yourself as a hyphenated American (such as Chinese-American or German-American) does not contribute to the nation’s unity and divides people into groups. Instead, everyone who is an American should be called an American and nothing else.²²

“There is no such a thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else.”²³

¹⁹ Philip Gleason, “The Melting Pot: Symbol of Fusion or Confusion?” *American Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1964): 22.

²⁰ Gleason, “The Melting Pot: Symbol of Fusion or Confusion?,” 22.

²¹ Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, “What is an American?” in *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York, Fox, Duffield & Company, 1904).

²² “Theodore Roosevelt, Hyphenated Americans, 1915,” Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot*, 1907, Scribd, Accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.scribd.com/document/500441943/4301-05-MeltingPot>

²³ Theodore Roosevelt. “*Hyphenated Americans*.” Speech at Carnegie Hall, New York. October 12, 1915.

This speech emphasises the need for assimilation. Considering that immigrants would be loyal to their host country's customs, traditions and the standard of living while still staying loyal to their home country's heritage.

3 Gish Jen

Gish Jen's first novel about three immigrants pursuing the American dream is called *Typical American* and was published in 1991. Her second novel *Mona in the Promised Land* was published in 1996 and will be analysed in more detail later. Her subsequent work was a collection of short stories called *Who Is Irish?* published in 1999.²⁴

Her novels focus on the same Chinese immigrant family named the Changs. The parents, Helen and Ralph, who own a pancake restaurant, have two daughters, Mona and Callie. In *Typical American*, Gish Jen focuses on the parents Helen and Ralph and his sister Theresa, who all flee to the United States of America to escape the political situation in China. In an interview on NPR, Gish Jen is asked by a journalist why there are no real Americans in the novel. She addressed this issue in the *MELUS* Interview, and she mentioned that there is an irony in the name. The Changs use the term "typical American" to describe everyone unlike their family. However, at the end of the novel, they become typical Americans themselves.²⁵

On the other hand, her novel *Mona in the Promised Land* depicts the lives of Chang's daughters – Mona and Callie. She portrays the adventures of teenage years and adolescent life and the different cultures and difficulties that come with it. Additionally, Gish Jen faced disadvantages as a Chinese-American author. Even though she hoped to be called an American author, she is being called a Chinese-American author.²⁶

²⁴ Don Lee, "About Gish Jen," *Ploughshares* 26, No. 2/3 (Fall 2000): 217-222.

²⁵ Yuko Matsakawa, "MELUS Interview: Gish Jen" *MELUS* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 114-115.

²⁶ Don Lee, "About Gish Jen," *Ploughshares* 26, No. 2/3 (Fall 2000): 222.

4 Analysis of the Novel *Mona in the Promised Land*

Gish Jen is a Chinese-American author whose literary work was inspired by her life. She was born to Chinese immigrants living in the United States of America. She was raised Catholic and Chinese, which might have influenced her identity. This motive can be seen in most of her literary work.

Her novel *Mona in the Promised Land* introduces the Changs, a Chinese family of four living in the United States of America. It closely depicts the life of the main protagonist, Mona Chang, who struggles to find her true self and her true identity. The novel portrays the relationships with her parents – Ralph and Helen, who are first-generation immigrants from China. Her sister Callie also contributes to Mona’s journey to finding her identity.

Mona in the Promised Land is a sequel to Gish Jen’s first novel, *Typical American*, where she focuses on the Changs family before having children. The sequel *Mona in the Promised Land* focuses rather on their daughters, the second generation of the Changs family.²⁷

After newly moving to Scarshill, New York, in 1968, where the Changs are considered “the New Jews” as they are similarly the “model minority” who persuaded their American Dream,²⁸ Mona attends a new school, where she is the only Chinese. However, she quickly adjusts and becomes quite popular mainly because other people are interested in her Chinese culture. However, she often lies to get people’s attention in order to be more interesting. She was forced to fake her identity because she had little to no Chinese heritage to her. She lies about knowing karate or about Chinese practices on how to get pregnant with tea. Just like they do in China, according to her, she even lies about knowing Chinese.²⁹ Her parents, Ralph and Helen, wanted to raise their daughters “true Americans”, which is why they did not learn much Chinese. Mona’s search for her true identity leads to her becoming Jewish because of the influence of her Jewish friends and her desperate need to fit in.

²⁷ Begoña Simal González. “The (Re)Birth of Mona Changowitz: Rituals and Ceremonies of Cultural Conversion and Self-Making in ‘Mona in the Promised Land.’” *MELUS* 26, no. 2 (2001): 231.

²⁸ González, “The (Re)Birth of Mona Changowitz,” 233.

²⁹ Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 5.

4.1 Main Characters

4.1.1 Mona

Mona Chang, the novel's main character, is a girl in her teenage years who struggles to find her identity. She is a second-generation immigrant, meaning her immigrant parents moved to the United States of America before her birth. They wanted to raise her the "American way." The novel *Mona in the Promised Land* follows her journey as she experiences significant changes in her life – becoming a woman, changing her religion or finding her real identity. She attempts to resolve her issue of not knowing her identity throughout the entire novel. Mona, as a member of the hippie generation, finally comes to terms with her ethnic awareness and consciousness. However, the majority of realisation happens in the novel's epilogue.³⁰

After Callie leaves for college, all of the attention is on Mona. Her parents face the constant pressure from her sister Callie to Mona. Similarly, the pressure comes from her peers, who think she acts politely for an American girl. "Oh, Mona, you really need to think more like an American. You're too polite."³¹ It is essential to consider her doubts when analysing her and her position in her community. "Is she a proper best friend? A proper sister, a proper daughter, a proper student? None of those things."³² She continues to doubt herself, yet she does not have a proper reason to since she tries not to let anyone who cares about her down or disappoint her parents.

As mentioned, her parents wanted to raise her as a "true American girl," meaning that they did not teach her to speak Chinese. Nonetheless, every time she acts "the American way," her mother is outraged, expecting her to respect Chinese values, same as her. When Mona converts to Judaism, her mother is at a loss for words. According to her, being American does not mean becoming Jewish. That is not American because most Jewish people as well immigrated to the United States of America. However, being brought up according to Chinese values with expectations of becoming an American means that Mona struggles to integrate into American society since having manners is not considered very American.³³

Mona's romantic relationship with Seth significantly contributed to her maturing and becoming a female. Her mother has always warned her about boys and sexual

³⁰ González, "The (Re)Birth of Mona Changowitz," 229.

³¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 57.

³² Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 110.

³³ Rocío G. Davis, Sāmi Ludwig, eds., *Asian American Literature in the International Context: Readings on Fiction, Poetry, and Performance* (Hamburg: Lit, 2002), 227-228.

intercourse, persuading her to remain a nice, innocent girl. However, Mona believes it made her a different person. She explains how her partner, Seth, treats her. He is gentle and patient, and she can confide in him about everything. He understands when it comes to dealing with Mona's traumatic experience of being assaulted by a burglar, meaning that he does not pressure her into anything she is not in the mood for. He is the first person who touched and kissed her so passionately. She explains how he is the first one to give her goosebumps when touching and holding each other in their arms. She feels completely different with each day she spends with Seth, gradually evolving into her better self.³⁴ She points to the fact that after sexually engaging with her boyfriend Seth, she has lost her childhood innocence forever. Consequently, she feels as if Seth has filled in the blank in her, what she believes will happen when a person finds a genuine relationship and connection.³⁵

Lastly, her boyfriend Seth calls Mona: ““My dear Changowitz. “” Changowitz is a nickname their mutual friend, Andy Kaplan, gave her. This is the first time she hears it. In the epilogue, which continues the story about Mona years after, it is mentioned that she and Seth marry each other and later even have a child called Io. Mona and Seth decide to take the mutual name Changowitz, which perfectly describes Mona accepting her identity as a Jewish Chinese woman. Gish Jen suggests that her daughter, Io Changowitz, can choose her own identity, similar to her mother, Mona. At the novel's end, Mona reveals that Io's favourite meal, Mange, is part Chinese, part Jewish, but of course, Italian, as she spilt a bottle of oregano the other day.³⁶

³⁴ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 109-110.

³⁵ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 214-215.

³⁶ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 303.

4.1.2 Callie

Callie, Mona's older sister, also struggled to find her real identity, similar to Mona. However, they both went in entirely different directions. As Mona was turning Jewish, Callie was becoming more Chinese than her parents.³⁷ Callie is an intelligent girl, and according to Mona, her sister is the perfect example of a perfect, well-behaved daughter. She has never been in trouble at school—every activity she does with grace, like riding her bike. Riding with perfect posture, it resembles a ballet dancer who has just finished her ballet lessons. One of the most severe cases of misbehaving was reading under her duvet after her bedtime. Despite all that, she was not the favourite daughter Mona was due to Chang's belief in the hierarchal structure. Meaning that they will always have their favourite daughter, the one who is the better one or the one who is the more loved one.³⁸

At the beginning of the novel, Callie starts to attend lectures at Harvard. She applied to multiple universities, some of them being the most elite schools in the country, and she was accepted to each. After her exams, she begins her summer job as a waitress. Her parents do not appreciate the fact that she works as a waitress in Rhode Island when she could have been working in their family restaurant. Nevertheless, she stayed ambitious and insisted that she gained experience and connection as the majority of people working there were either from Harvard or Yale University.

During her studies, she shares her dormitory with an African-American girl, Naomi. Naomi greatly influences Callie into becoming more Chinese. Callie did not know much Chinese initially because her parents had never taught her or Mona. Their mother, Helen, wanted to raise American daughters, and according to her, learning Chinese is not necessary for a truly American girl. However, Callie found her way to be fond of the Chinese language and her Chinese heritage through her roommate Naomi. At first, she does not feel confident enough to disclose to her parent the information that she has been studying Chinese at university.

However, after practising a conversation with Ralph and Helen, she quickly realises that she does not understand them at all. According to her, they speak too quickly to prove their point that, for Callie, "learning Chinese is a waste of time" and that "it has no use."³⁹

³⁷ Andrew Furman. "Immigrant Dreams and Civic Promises: (Con-)Testing Identity in Early Jewish American Literature and Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*." MELUS 25, no. 1 (2000):214.

³⁸ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 100.

³⁹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 129.

Nevertheless, Callie quickly realises that they speak Chinese with an accent, just like English. The parents continue teasing her about the type of Chinese she speaks. According to Ralph, she speaks “Harvard Chinese”, which is the standard way of speaking Chinese in contrast to him and Helen, who speak “the real Chinese. Classical stuff.”⁴⁰ They continue to taunt her and her Chinese and say that she speaks as if she comes from Peking’s upper class, pronouncing the words correctly, which is not common in Shanghai’s lower class where they are from. They would prefer Callie to study engineering or accounting. After learning that Harvard University does not even offer accounting or engineering, they are left in shock as it is the most prestigious school in the United States of America.⁴¹

As the first daughter of the Changs, she faced a different approach from their parents than Mona. She was expected to have good grades at school, attend a prestigious University and become a doctor. Callie and even Mona, attending medical school has always been their dream. They work hard daily to save enough money for Callie’s college tuition. However, Callie expresses her opinion about the life her parents created for her; she is not interested in medical school. Ralph responds: “Life is about work, and since when is work supposed to be interesting.”⁴²

With that, he implies that Callie should consider her family’s well-being before her desires, and she should work hard, just like them, to provide for her future family. Finding a job that she enjoys would not fit the Chinese mindset. She had some rebellions during her puberty, but later on, she accepted her fate to become a doctor, a paediatrician, as her parents had always wished.

She accepted her identity as an Asian-American woman and even began to use her original Chinese name. As González suggest, the term concludes all “Orientals”, which is quite controversial, especially amongst Ralph and Helen, who cannot believe their daughter would put herself into the same group with the Japanese, Indians and Koreans as they are not "authentic Asians".⁴³

As Furman suggests, the sisters, Mona and Callie face similar problems but deal with them differently.⁴⁴ The sisters have multiple disagreements with their mother, mainly about the different parenting styles that other children their age experience.

⁴⁰ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 128.

⁴¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 128-129.

⁴² Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 233.

⁴³ González, *The (Re)Birth of Mona Changowitz*, 229.

⁴⁴ Furman, *Immigrant Dreams and Civic Promises*, 214.

Working at the family restaurant for free whenever their parents need it is not exactly a teenager's ideal way to spend their afterschool hours. Callie especially hates that their friends from school come to the restaurant on Saturdays. Consequently, she does not leave the back of the restaurant while the people she knows are still present. That is one of the reasons she disliked being Chinese, working in the family restaurant all day while people her age enjoyed themselves.⁴⁵ Mona and Callie tried to peacefully fight against working there, but the idea was shut down immediately. They both turned from children to Disappointments quickly. Helen tried to argue that she spent her entire day at the restaurant working hard. "Mom's tired."⁴⁶ With that, she indicates that all the days working hard are for her children.

However, the sisters did not always understand each other. Their parents put Callie under a lot of pressure as a child. Moreover, they made it clear which daughter they prefer. After Callie graduated high school and started attending Harvard University, all the parents' focus shifted from Callie to Mona. "For now, Mona has been signed up for the family project too."⁴⁷ Suddenly, the Changs pressure Mona to also apply to Harvard University.

After all, one generation is supposed to build on the last, ascending and ascending like the steps of a baby bamboo shoot; and how nice indeed for the parents to be able to say, "The girls go to Harvard"! Mona realizes this herself, the misty elegance of the sound – it lingers in the air like something out of the perfume spritzer.⁴⁸

Explaining how the parents would appreciate both of their daughters attending Harvard University, for the sound of it for the most part. Studying at Harvard would provide the parents with a matter to brag about. Mona does like the sound of it; however, she is not certain that she truly desires to select Harvard University for her studies or that she has the knowledge and abilities to be admitted. Finally, Mona understands how Callie had felt most of her childhood, pressured by her parents to meet their expectations.

⁴⁵ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 29.

⁴⁶ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 26.

⁴⁷ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 100.

⁴⁸ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 100.

4.1.3 Sherman

After meeting a new student from Japan, Sherman Matsumoto, Mona identifies herself with Sherman in a particular way. Sherman has just moved from Japan to the United States of America with his parents. However, he speaks little to no English. Mona is expected to take him under her wing as they are both Asian. They somehow connect with each other even though they do not understand each other much. Mona tries to learn Sherman's common English words and phrases, and she explains to him that he can become American if he wants to. All he has to do is learn some rules and speeches and then switch, just like that.

As for the things he asks her, they're not topics Mona ever talked about. Does she like it here? "Of course I like it here. I was born here," Mona says. Is Mona Jewish? "Jewish!" She laughs. "Oy!" Is she American? "Sure, I'm American," Mona says. "Everybody who's born here is American, and also some people who convert from what they were before. You could become American." But he says no, he could never. "Sure you could," Mona says. "You only have to learn some rules and speeches."

"But I Japanese."

"You could become American anyway," Mona says. "Like I could become Jewish, if I wanted to. I'd just have to switch, that's all."⁴⁹

After they spend much time together studying English and keeping each other company, Mona develops feelings for Sherman. It is expected in a way by their peers. They have presumptions about Mona and Sherman dating each other. They are the only two Asians attending this school, after all. It all comes to them promising to marry each other. However, they never do. Sherman moves back to Japan eventually. Although Mona attempts to keep in touch with him and writes to him, their relationship does not continue as he writes, "You will never be Japanese."⁵⁰ Later in the novel, Mona's friends, Andy Kaplan and Seth, impersonate Sherman to taunt her. However, she does not hear back from the real Sherman Matsumoto.

Sherman's idea of assimilation with the Americans is much more complicated than Mona's. He does not believe all it takes is to switch, and suddenly, he is not Japanese anymore; he is American. His assimilating would take more effort, in his opinion.

⁴⁹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 14.

⁵⁰ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 22.

4.1.4 Seth

During their first few encounters, Mona and Seth become compatible immediately. When Seth, Mona's future boyfriend, is introduced to her, she feels a unique connection because he is fascinated by her personality. "He is interested in Mona, partly because of her superlative grade point average, but mostly because she is a phenomenon. A Chinese Jew!"⁵¹ However, Seth does not tire her with dull questions like strangers generally do. "Do you speak Chinese? What do you eat at home?"⁵²

"When Mona sits back down, Mrs. Ingle asks, "And where, are you from?"
To which Mona answers, surprised, "The same town as you. In fact, Eloise and I are classmates."
Says Mrs. Ingle again, "But where are you from?"
Eloise's brother Andrew glosses this helpfully. "She means where are you from, from."⁵³

Seth is fully invested in her true nature. For the first time in her life, someone is fascinated by her mind, which she finds liberating after all those years when everyone was only interested in China and Chinese culture.

With Seth being Jewish, Mona has a close person to her who can understand her conversion to Judaism. However, he identifies himself as an "authentic inauthentic Jew," which means that he is a Jew out of habit, not out of personal relationship to his religion.⁵⁴ Seth's view on life is somewhat different from Mona's. According to Mona, Seth occasionally lacks manners. She was raised to consider others and be selfless, in comparison to Seth, who believes that to be selfish is to be human.⁵⁵ When going to a concert, Seth and Mona face their differences. They arrive with a couple of friends; however, they spot another couple sitting in better seats downstairs, with two not-occupied seats next to them. The other couple waves at them, encouraging them to join them in the better seats. Seth immediately fancies joining them; however, Mona hesitates. She feels regret leaving the other couple alone as they were the ones who arrived with them. Those differences originate in the way they were brought up, the Chinese and the American ways.⁵⁶ Additionally, at first, Seth was only interested in free love. He is pretty opinionated, even on the topic of love. After a while, Mona realizes that he is not the

⁵¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 63.

⁵² Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 63.

⁵³ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 181.

⁵⁴ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 112.

⁵⁵ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 120.

⁵⁶ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 120.

relationship type, and he thinks of love as a "kind of long-term mutual survival-related imprinting."⁵⁷ Unlike Mona, who had always dreamt of going, he had no intention of attending college before finding himself. He had his teenage rebellions, the same as all of his siblings. His way of resisting his stepmother was leaving their house and moving outside, meaning he lives in a teepee.

4.1.5 Helen and Ralph

Raph and Helen, Mona's parents, give insight into what it meant to be a first-generation immigrant in the United States of America. Mona's teacher is curious about her and her parents' identity and asks if she considers herself Chinese. "I'm Chinese American."⁵⁸ The teacher continues with her questions and asks about her parents.

"Of course," Mona says. "They're immigrants." As she says this, she knows that her parents would never use that word on themselves. They think it means people who try to bring live chickens on buses and do not own actual suitcases.⁵⁹

Even though Helen is quite proud of her cooking abilities, she does not actually use authentic Chinese recipes. Frequently, she uses frozen pre-made food or invents her own Americanized recipes, for example, her latest favourite recipe – Peking duck cooked Westchester Style, meaning that she soaks the duck in Pepsi-Cola before continuing with the recipe. In contrast to Naomi's cooking, she does not cook authentic Chinese food often. On the other hand, Naomi, interested in Chinese cuisine, successfully attempts original Chinese recipes, such as tea-smoked duck, which requires burning tea leaves and then cooking the duck in it for 16 hours.⁶⁰

Helen and Ralph tend to think of themselves as the "better immigrants." Although their behaviour or social class might be different to the people Mona mentions, they are still immigrants, the same as the people who bring chickens on the buses and do not own suitcases. They tend to separate themselves from the other immigrants and do not compare themselves to them. All immigrants come to the United States for different reasons, such as financial or same as the Changs, political. However, they all share the same purpose: to start a new life in the United States.

⁵⁷ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 113.

⁵⁸ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 27.

⁵⁹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 27.

⁶⁰ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 186.

After Mona's conversion to Judaism, Helen is not pleased with Mona even though she has converted to a different religion while still living in China as well.⁶¹

⁶¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 48.

4.2 Identity

It is evident that Mona struggles with finding her identity throughout her childhood and teenage years. She is not entirely Chinese, mainly because she was not born there. She is not a true American, with the reasoning being that her parents are immigrants from China. Is she a Chinese-American? As a second-generation immigrant, she believes that she can just switch to what she feels is the most in touch with. That is why she instantly becomes invested when her friend Barbara announces she has become Jewish. Barbara proposes to her that her turning Jewish is a new chapter of her life. Sooner or later, Mona becomes Jewish as well.⁶²

At first, Mona and Barbara did not identify with Judaism much. All they needed to do was remember. Mona wondered how is it possible to forget your identity as she could ever forget that she is Chinese. However, according to Barbara, all that is needed is not to forget. However, if they considered bringing up these questions to Rabbi Horowitz, their spiritual teacher at the time, he would go into more detail than “just remember.”⁶³

With Mona becoming Jewish, people started to wonder. Whether this is some kind of teenage rebellion or whether she is influenced or possibly even unknowingly forced by her Jewish friends. Perhaps she craves her own freedom or fancies an escape from her strict parents who want nothing but perfection. Maybe she desires to differentiate from her parents and her sister. When conversing with Rabbi Horowitz, he also questions her intentions. “You mean, is this adolescent rebellion? Maybe. But also I like it here at the temple. I like it that you tell everyone to ask, ask, instead of just obey, obey.”⁶⁴

Naturally, it is not expected from a Catholic Chinese girl to convert to Judaism. However, Mona appreciates the fact that she is finally accepted somewhere. Subsequently, she starts the journey of finding one’s true identity. With turning Jewish, some of her habits were in serious need of a change, including Mona’s favourite time of the year – Christmas. The Changs used to unpack a fake Christmas tree every year. They have purchased a real Scotch pine Christmas tree for just a few years. Right when Mona became Jewish, and was expected not to celebrate Christmas like other Jews. Instead of putting up a Christmas tree, they light up a menorah, a nine-branched candelabra. Jewish people celebrate Hanukkah, which is equivalent to Christmas since it is celebrated around

⁶² Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 31.

⁶³ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 32.

⁶⁴ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 34.

the same time, and people have connected these two over time. Hanukkah represents Jewish history and the fact that Jews had to fight for their freedom multiple times in the past. It symbolizes resistance, strength and willingness to sacrifice everything for religious freedom, even their political and economic freedoms.⁶⁵

However, Rabbi Horowitz mentions other Jews who also celebrate Christmas. They improvise with bushes with a Star of David instead of trees. He assures her that the process of becoming Jewish might take more time than she could ever imagine. She must remain patient and stop being in distress about nonkosher matters.⁶⁶ “Kosher is great, but nonkosher is the way things sometimes happen to be.”⁶⁷ Assuring her that occasionally it is acceptable to deviate from others does not make her less Jewish.

Additionally, Mona’s sister Callie fights against putting up a Christmas tree as well, but for a different reason. Her college roommate, Naomi, shares her opinions with Callie.

“Naomi says it’s a symbol of oppression.”

“Naomi says Christmas trees aren’t indigenous to China.”

“She says you probably didn’t have Christmas trees, growing up, why should you have one now? She says we should stick to our guns, like the Jews.”⁶⁸

Helen answers that they indeed had a Christmas tree growing up, mainly because she grew up attending a convent school in China run by French missionaries who wanted to convert them. “We are Buddhist, and Taoist, and Catholic. We do however we want.”⁶⁹ Helen discloses that in her years living in China, she has also converted, with the difference only being religion. After Mona’s baptism, Callie reports the news about her conversion to Helen. As someone who, in a way, converted the same as Mona, Helen does not understand her, and she does not accept her. “You know, you bring shame on our family, you act this way. What do you think people think of us? How can you be Jewish? Chinese people don’t do such things.”⁷⁰ For the most part, she is concerned about the family image, not about her daughter’s search of identity. Out of spite, Mona denies being Chinese. “I guess I must not be Chinese, then.”⁷¹

⁶⁵ Paul Steinberg, *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Winter Holidays: Hanukkah, Tu B’shevat, Purim* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 11-12.

⁶⁶ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 43.

⁶⁷ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 43.

⁶⁸ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 41.

⁶⁹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 42.

⁷⁰ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 45.

⁷¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 46.

The statement angers her mother. That is not the perfect Chinese daughter she envisioned. There is an irony that Helen is not perfect either. She converted just as Mona. She also became influenced by Americans. However, those issues are not spoken enough about. Therefore, Mona starts to doubt her Chinese identity and continues her journey of finding herself.

Mona tries to defend herself. Her mother was keen on raising “perfect Chinese girls” who are also “true American girls.” According to Mona, being American means being whatever you want. And Mona just happened to pick being Jewish.⁷² She attempts to explain to her mother that being Jewish is to be American. That is her identity.⁷³ Eventually, Mona begins to wonder about the connection between Judaism and Chineseness. She notices that after becoming Jewish, she started feeling much more Chinese than ever before.⁷⁴

The reason is that she begins to notice progress in her journey. Since becoming Jewish, Mona attempts to introduce her journey of finding her identity and, most importantly, converting to Judaism to other people. When speaking to Alfred, the number two cook in her parent’s restaurant, things went differently than planned. Alfred is an African-American man; thus, he does not believe a person like Mona, a Chinese girl, can convert to Judaism. Mona and Barbara tried to educate him about Jewish matters. However, he fears that they are attempting to convert him as well. Mona is convinced that even Alfred, as an African-American man, can become Jewish. She even suggests that the world would become a better place if every person turned Jewish. However, Alfred’s opinion differs completely. Barbara shares her point of view on how to be a good Jew.

“The whole key to Judaism is to ask, ask, instead of just obey, obey,” Mona says. “That’s what I learned. Also you’ve got to know your holidays. You’ve got to know all the ritual, so you know who you are and don’t spend your time trying to be Wasp and acting like you don’t have anything to complain about. You’ve got to realize you’re a minority.”⁷⁵

To which Alfred responds:

“Man, but we’re asking, all right, ‘says Alfred. ‘We’re asking and asking, but there ain’t nobody answering. And nobody is calling us Wasp, man, and nobody is forgetting we’re a minority, and if we don’t mind our manners, we’re like as not

⁷² Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 49.

⁷³ Furman, *Immigrant Dreams and Civic Promises*, 216.

⁷⁴ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 67.

⁷⁵ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 137.

to end up doing time in a concrete hotel. We're black, see. We're Negroes. 'He says this emphatically, but rotates his head as if to judge the reaction, scanning the room like a second table fan.'⁷⁶

To summarize, becoming Jewish is not that easy for an African-American man, especially during a time like this. Turning Jewish might offend people, leading to unimaginable consequences for Alfred and other African-American people attempting to change their religion. In addition to converting, African Americans were oppressed in the United States of America, and by converting, their lives would become complicated to a bigger extent. "It's like what Baldwin says—when white men fight back, they're heroes. When black men fight back, they're savages."⁷⁷

With that, he refers to the oppression black people had to face and how they were faced with a different approach than white people. Most importantly, they are seen as the villains in a fight for freedom and equal rights.

As a way to come closer to Mona's religion, she and her friends, Barbara and Seth, try to accommodate Alfred after he is discharged from his job at the pancake house. He had a misunderstanding with his partner and had to leave their apartment. Mona and her friends wanted to provide him with their help and relocated him to Barbara's house while her parents were away for a vacation. They wished Alfred would get back on his feet; however, the situation did not go according to their plan. Alfred felt as if he was living in prison due to not being able to leave the Gugelstein family house through the front entrance and living in a den. As he begins to invite his friends, the situation gets out of hand. Mona and her friends notice a flask with a high value is missing, blaming Alfred and his friends. With Alfred and his friends being accused of theft, he decides to move out. Additionally, Alfred accused them of being racist. However, Mona and her friends were not suspicious of him because of his race but because he invited strangers into their home, leaving them with nothing but speculations. Later, they figured it was most likely a thief who broke in through secret tunnels and stole the flask. However, they did not have any evidence. Nevertheless, despite apologising to Alfred for the misunderstanding, they were devastated that their attempt to embrace Jewish values by helping Alfred had failed.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 137.

⁷⁷ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 195.

⁷⁸ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 205-207.

Moreover, Mona speculates whether all Chinese teenagers feel guilt or whether they accept their position in society. Mona believes her Americanness is responsible for wondering about the fairness of her situation. Irritated by her mother's behaviour, she confesses that, after all, Rabbi Horowitz might have been correct about the reason why Mona converted.

Perhaps this is why Mona allied herself with the Jews, with their booming belief in doing right, with their calling and their crying out. Justice! But then again, maybe she would have turned into anything no daughter of her mother could be; maybe it was just that simple. Adolescent rebellion, just like Rabbi Horowitz said, maybe certain urges come shrink-wrapped with your first bottle of pHisoHex.⁷⁹

Concerning Mona ethnicity, she is Chinese, being the second generation immigrant. However, her constant search for her true identity continues throughout the novel.

In a conversation with Sherman, who later in the novel turns out to be Andy Kaplan's friend mocking Mona, they wonder whether it is natural for a person to migrate. They discuss what they think would happen to someone who fell off the rocks into the water—whether the person would get smashed against the boulders, or pulled out to sea. "Maybe people shouldn't be out on the rocks to begin with, Mona says. "Maybe land animals should stay on land."⁸⁰

They imply that it is unnatural for a person to leave their home country and move to a different one. People would stop feeling like they exist in a place where it is not meant to be. It is not their natural habitat. She continues to explain how it is possible for people to slowly expose themselves to cold water, get used to swimming in the cold ocean and build thicker skin that protects them. Subsequently, they would get used to the coldness of the ocean. This means that after adjusting and experiencing another habitat, they would be able to survive. This process is called adaptation, which can even transform into cultural assimilation.⁸¹

They continue their conversation about assimilation; thus, "Sherman" shares his transition from Japanese to Hawaiian with Mona. Which, of course, as this new Sherman being Andy Kaplan's persona, is only fiction. During Mona's job in the temple hotline, Sherman" calls numerous times, sometimes even hanging up the phone immediately.

⁷⁹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 255.

⁸⁰ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 227.

⁸¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 228.

Mona waits a long period of time, hoping the real Sherman will call her; thus, when Andy Kaplan and later Seth impersonate him, Mona is grateful to even speak to him, and she does not suspect it is not the real Sherman. Of course, she had not heard from him for a long period of time, so she was not suspicious when he sounded different and more mature and even spoke English, which he did not know before. Mona finds it alarming that Sherman speaks with a Hawaiian accent. However, Seth and Andy Kaplan could not impersonate Sherman's accent.⁸²

Consequently, they made up his Hawaiian identity. Only towards the end of the novel is it revealed that the real Sherman is probably still in Japan and that, on the top line, she spoke with Seth or Andy Kaplan. They even asked a Hawaiian exchange student to impersonate Sherman so that Mona could meet him at school, impersonating him. To whom Mona believed.⁸³ Nevertheless, Mona recognizes herself in Sherman. She recognises her need to fit in, and "Sherman" also experienced that need. She confides in him about how she is not white or black. She is not as Jewish as other Jewish people nor as Chinese as people living in Chinatowns.

"You are a sore thumb," says Sherman.

"Sticking out by yourself."

She says, "I'm never at home."⁸⁴

Mona continues by informing "Sherman" about her parents, who forced her to apply to Harvard University; it is all they live for. To which "Sherman" responds with his issues, the pressure and competition he experienced as a Japanese. Speaking from experience, Mona is sure he must be relieved not to be Japanese anymore.⁸⁵

In conclusion, Mona does not fit in either category. She is not a true American because her behaviour does not resemble her peers. Nor is she a regular image of a Jewish girl due to the fact that she converted. In addition, she embraced Jewish customs to such an extent that she stands out even among other Jews. Similarly, she is not a proper Chinese girl either since she diverges from her mother's expectations and does not hold the same values in some matters.

Moreover, her appearance does not fit into the two most common skin colours in the United States of America. In a conversation with Alfred, an African-American cook

⁸² Erika T. Lin "Mona on the Phone: The Performative Body and Racial Identity in 'Mona in the Promised Land.'" MELUS 28, no. 2 (2003): 53.

⁸³ Lin, *Mona on the Phone*, 53.

⁸⁴ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 231.

⁸⁵ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 231.

working in her parent's restaurant, she realizes that people do know whether to refer to her as a white or black-skinned person.⁸⁶

“She! You got yourself a lady gardener?”

“Sure.”

“What for, man, what for? You tell Alfred why you got a lady gardener.”

“It just so happens.”

“She black or white?”

“I’m not sure.”

“In that case, she’s black.”

“What do you mean?”

“White is white, man. Everything else is black. Half and half is black.”

“Are you telling me I’m black?” Mona says.”⁸⁷

According to Alfred, if a person has at least one of his parents of a black skin colour, they are automatically black. If a person has lighter skin, that is common; they are still black. Everyone else is white. Alfred’s perspective leaves Mona questioning her identity, wondering whether she is black or white. Compared to Alfred, Callie’s roommate Naomi adds a greater extent to Mona’s search for identity. Naomi is African-American, too. However, she has a different perspective on race. She introduces Mona to the term “coloured.” She explains how not everyone needs to be either black or white and that there are many people in between, coloured people.

“Mona has never thought of herself as colored before, though she knew herself not to be white. Yellow, says Naomi now. You are yellow. A yellow person, a yellow girl. It takes some getting used to, this idea, especially since Mona’s summertime color is most definitely brown, and the rest of the year she is not exactly a textbook primary. But then Naomi is not black either; she claims to be closer in color to a paper bag. If she were a cabinet door or a shade of hair dye, people would have a name for her exact shade. But as she is only a person, she is called black, just as Mona and Callie are called yellow. And as yellow is a color, they are colored, which is how it is they are working together on the project.”⁸⁸

Furthermore, Naomi helps Mona to come closer to finding her identity, as Mona has never thought of herself as coloured or yellow before. Moreover, for the first time in her life, that is something that she can truly identify with.

Similarly, numerous factors and situations contributed to shaping Mona’s real identity, for instance, the attack of a burglar, Andy Kaplan’s impersonation of Sherman,

⁸⁶ Šárka Bubíková et al. *Literary Childhoods: Growing Up in British and American Literature*. (Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2008), 109-110.

⁸⁷ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 155.

⁸⁸ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 170.

her family's unnecessary advice or Fernando, the thief who stole the flask at the Gugelstein house. Mona describes it as:

“Little packages she never ordered but that arrived in the mail all the same. Sender unknown. And she and her family with their unofficial contributions. They send out packages too. Addressee forgotten. Package returned. Curses due.”⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 289.

4.3 Differences in Chinese and American Parenting

American and Chinese parents have different approaches to parenting, which adds to difficulties when trying to assimilate their children. When comparing the way Mona was brought up to the way her friend from school, Barbara Gugelstein, was, there are pretty noticeable differences. Firstly, Barbara gets paid to do house chores. However, not only are Mona and Callie expected to do all kinds of chores daily, but they also have to work at the family restaurant every day for free. They are on-call and come to help whenever there is a rush or when they are one employee too short.

Helen envisioned her daughters to be “true American girls.” According to her, she brought them up in a Westernized way and defined them as Chinese-Americans.⁹⁰ However, Mona and Callie’s opinions might differ from their mother’s opinion on her parenting style. “I think I’m very Westernized. I brought you children up without you even speak Chinese.”⁹¹

Helen does not allow her children to follow their desires, nor does she support opinions and actions that are not identical to hers. She is willing to argue with anyone who thinks unlike. Mona’s turning Jewish has awakened uncertainty and mainly distrust in her own daughter. Helen fears that she might experiment more another time, like turning black. “Who knows? Tomorrow you’ll come home and tell me you want to be black.”⁹²

Life in China and life in The United States operates differently. According to Mona, American citizens are more individualistic than Chinese people.

Furthermore, Mona refers to a story her mother’s friend once mentioned. Helen’s friend shares her college room with two other Chinese students. She explains how she arrived last on the day they were supposed to move in. If she were to share her room with an American student, she would be left with the worst bed of them all since the other students arrived first. However, with both of her roommates being Chinese, she is left with the best bed there. It is evident that Chinese people simply would not occupy the bed located furthest from the window and closest to the bathroom and the radiator. Their inclination towards politeness and the way they were brought up caused them all to feel guilty. The first two students who arrived at the dormitory felt too guilty to take the best bed. That would be unacceptable. Similarly, Helen’s friend, the last roommate to arrive,

⁹⁰ Furman, *Immigrant Dreams and Civic Promises*, 215.

⁹¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 48.

⁹² Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 49.

also felt guilty about occupying the best bed. Consequently, she provides them with fruit or gifts them with movie tickets as compensation.⁹³

Additionally, the Changs understand the United States of America as a constant fight for what rightfully belongs to whom. “Mona understands that according to the rules if you don’t eat up, someone else will.”⁹⁴ She compares observing the different behaviours to how Chinese and American families eat dinner.

“Or is it just that other people grew up eating their individual portions from their individual plates, whereas the Changs help themselves from bowls in the middle of the table, and no one can leave until everyone else is done.”⁹⁵

There is a striking resemblance between Chinese and American behaviour and how they plate dinners. Mona believes that Americans are primarily concerned about their plate, whatever else is outside their interest. On the other hand, Chinese people are responsible for the plates of the entire family; hence, the bowls are shared between all of them. Another difference that is greatly connected with the issue is how Chinese and American people contribute to society. Mona’s mother observed how much the behaviour differs. Chinese people tend to avoid unnecessary problems and do not get involved in matters that do not concern them and their families. “If families take care of themselves, society will take care of itself.”⁹⁶ People in China are responsible only for their own families, and they believe every family should do as such. They are not curious about what happens in other neighbourhoods or even across the Chinese borders. “Nothing to be concerned about – nothing with which anyone has a relationship.”⁹⁷ This is an entirely different approach in contrast to the people in the United States of America, who are extremely approachable and friendly and tend to assist other countries when necessary.⁹⁸

Additionally, unlike American families, the Changs family do not believe in vacations. According to them, it is all the American families think about. They suffer at work all year only to enjoy a few days of holiday, spending all of their savings and doing nothing particular other than exploring the lakeside. The Changs prefer to work hard all year, including their children, who are expected to contribute to the family business.⁹⁹

⁹³ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 67.

⁹⁴ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 67.

⁹⁵ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 67.

⁹⁶ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 236.

⁹⁷ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 236.

⁹⁸ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 236-237.

⁹⁹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 209.

In comparison to the Changs, Barbara Gugelstein's family are the ones whose year revolves around vacation. Every year, her parents leave for a vacation; however, they leave the children behind. After their return, they gift them with brand-new clothing and other presents.

Following Mona's assault and attempted robbery, she did not disclose this traumatic experience to her parents. To explain further, Mona's friend Barbara borrowed Mona her van when she was away on vacation. However, she was not the only one with a key. Seth had owned a spare key since being Barbara's former romantic partner. Mona was ambushed as she walked to the van parked in her family's driveway. At first, she believed it was Seth Mandel since it was not the first time he had attempted to break into Mona's borrowed car. However, with a palm over her mouth, as she was held down, she figured it was a burglar, not Seth. She struggled to shout at her parents, who turned on the light simultaneously, but unfortunately, there was no response. After many attempts to free herself from the burglar's grasp, Seth, being close by, scared the burglar away, saving Mona. Following her traumatic experience, she has withheld this from her parents. Mona did not disclose this information to anybody besides Seth, who was a witness. Mona has learnt from her previous mistakes of revealing her secrets, errors, and personal life matters to her parents. She remembers an accident that happened in her second grade. She accidentally drenched her doll's dress in water. She was afraid of punishment from her parents. Consequently, she grabbed her chopsticks and turned on the stove, drying the doll's dress over it. Subsequently, the dress caught fire, and their house almost got engulfed in flames. As of now, she still acts secretive against her parents. Following her assault, she searched for comfort and support; however, all her parent would have given her was punishment only. When confiding, she would only receive questions concerning her intentions, questioning her illogical actions and mainly being blamed for the attack. Fearing punishment and unnecessary questions, she confides to Seth only, strengthening their relationship.¹⁰⁰

After a few miscommunications, arguments and "rebellions," Helen introduces Mona to the harsh Chinese parenting instead of "typical American parenting", thinking they failed in their responsibility as a parent.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 107.

¹⁰¹ González, *The (Re)Birth of Mona Changowitz*, 235.

“We must think about our duty as parents.” Ralph is serious now.

“We laugh when you laugh; that just encourages you. We are wrong that way. Abdicate our responsibility!”

No more typical American parents,” agrees Helen. “No more let the kids run wild. From now on, we are Chinese parents.

“You know what you guys sound like?” Mona says. “You sound like the Puritans.”¹⁰²

With that, her parents prohibited Mona from spending time with her friends outside, doing no more fun activities, and just studying and working hard to be admitted to the top University in the United States of America. That causes Mona to run away from home, and Helen slaps her in the face. As Mona leaves, her mother blames it all on the fact that Mona converted to Judaism.¹⁰³

After leaving her home, she finds comfort in Seth’s stepmother. Mona enlightens her about her situation and perfectly captures the aim of a Chinese parent.

“My parents think people like you don’t care about your kids, that’s how come you let them do what they want,” says Mona. “They think you’re abdicating your responsibility.”

“How interesting.”

“In fact, they think that’s the exact job of the parents, to make sure the kids go to college.”

“Really.”

“And the kids’ job is to go and not hack off. Our job is to remember how hard our parents worked, and to get all A’s to make it up to them.”¹⁰⁴

With that, she points to the argument Mona and her mother had when she told Mona that by trying to raise her as an American girl, she failed due to Mona misbehaving often. According to Helen, American parents do not care about their children as they let them be themselves. Chinese parents’ main task and only concern is University and good grades.¹⁰⁵

Understandingly, after Mona returns home, she still feels as bitter towards her mother as she feels towards her; thus, Mona moves into Barbara’s old home with her boyfriend, Seth. In the novel’s epilogue, it is evident that Mona is not in contact with her mother, Helen. However, she was in touch with her father. Helen and Mona finally reconcile at Mona and Seth’s wedding many years later.¹⁰⁶ Overall, Mona is not

¹⁰² Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 246.

¹⁰³ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 248.

¹⁰⁴ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 259.

¹⁰⁵ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 259.

¹⁰⁶ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 304.

positive about whether her parents' behaviour differs from American parents' because of their Chinese mentality or whether there is a different reasoning.

4.4 Cultural assimilation

The Changs are willing to adjust to particular matters, but when it comes to assimilation or changing their habits completely, they will not allow that to themselves or their daughters. They cannot help themselves not to stay Chinese.¹⁰⁷ However, Mona becomes influenced by American schools that preach individualism and patriotism and the friends she is surrounded with most of her time. Nevertheless, her mother, Helen, wants to be as close to her Chinese heritage as possible. However, she confesses that she is losing parts of it as time passes.

“On the other hand, her mother once admitted that China was such a long time ago, and there were a lot of things she could hardly remember. She said sometimes she has trouble remembering her characters, that sometimes she’ll be writing along, and all of a sudden she won’t be sure how the strokes go.”¹⁰⁸

Consequently, her Chinese writing becomes quite messy sometimes. This evidence suggests that Helen and Ralph, first-generation immigrants, are on a journey of complete or at least partial cultural assimilation. However, even though Helen is losing parts of her heritage, that statement is incorrect.

Ralph’s English speaking abilities are relatively poor; however, they are not as poor as Cedric’s, the chef in the pancake house. Not long ago, he voluntarily left China in search of a better life, leaving his family behind. The Cultural Revolution in China impacted all of the Chinese population, worsened the economic situation, and destroyed lives; Cedric’s wife, two daughters, and parents were left behind. He moved to the United States of America with a condition to ensure that when the time was right, he would help his family escape as well. He portrayed how the Red Guard did not fear any violence against Chinese citizens – tarring, stoning, torturing or urinating on them.¹⁰⁹

To understand Mona and Cedric’s conversation, it is essential to provide historical context. Gish Jen refers to China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. During this period, Mao Zedong attempted to regain his control over the Chinese Communist Party. Almost ten years of violence, brutality, hunger and fear suffered by the people of China. The primary aim was to destroy the “four olds.” Meaning that the time of feudal Chinese traditions, such as old ideas, old customs, old habits and old culture, had to come to an end. Groups of teenagers and students in red armbands acted on behalf of the state and looted cities, for instance, Shanghai and Beijing.

¹⁰⁷ González, *The (Re)Birth of Mona Changowitz*, 232.

¹⁰⁸ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 86.

Consequently, young people were sent for “re-education”, and thousands were executed or tortured in order to restore order in cities. Red Guard despised bourgeoisie behaviour and acted against it, even if it meant humiliating or possibly even ending a person’s life. Finally, the horrendous revolution ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.¹¹⁰

Subsequently, this particular conversation reminded Cedric and Mona’s parents of the relatives who remained in China as they left for the United States of America. Cedric used to send money and letters to his relatives who remained in China. However, after a while, they stopped writing back. Mona was too afraid to ask Cedric about them, as he did not know the reason why they did not answer his letters and did not know if they were even alive at this point. On the other hand, the Changs were envious of him at first since they were no longer in contact with their family in China. After they arrived in the United States, they immediately wanted to provide money for their suffering families. Sending money was rather complicated. The reason for that being that it was impossible for them to send the money directly to Helen’s or Ralph’s family. They had to send money to the bank account of a friend in Hong Kong, who would send it to another friend and eventually, the money would get to Ralph’s relatives.¹¹¹ This part of the novel suggests how challenging it was to abandon relatives in China who all suffered during times like these. Families who eventually decided to migrate to the United States or other countries had to decide to leave as fast as possible, not thinking about other relatives. After immigrating, they hoped for any possible contact with them; however, similar to the Chang family, communication with relatives faded over the years. Immigrant families live with uncertainty and fear of whether their relatives are even alive, which stops them from complete assimilation when they have to think about the past and what they had lost.

When Sherman, the new student from Japan, visits Mona’s house for the first time, her mother is outraged. All she can think of is World War II and how the Japanese joined the wrong side. She immediately sends Sherman home and explains to Mona that World War II was not only about “putting the Jews in ovens”, as her history teacher taught her. But she describes how World War II also took place in China and how the Nanking Massacre affected the Chinese.¹¹² The Nanking Massacre happened in 1937, when Japan

¹¹⁰ Tom Phillips, “The Cultural Revolution: all you need to know about China’s political convulsion,” *The Guardian*, May 11, 2016.

¹¹¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 86-87.

¹¹² Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 15.

invaded China. After the invasion of central China began, the Chinese city of Nanking was conquered in December by the Japanese army. With that, massive violence broke out. Almost 300 000 people were murdered, and thousands were raped, tortured or injured by the Japanese army. The Nanking Massacre's monstrosities still have an impact on people to this day.¹¹³

However, Helen is holding prejudices against all Japanese people, although, Sherman, a teenage boy from Japan, had nothing to do with the events that took place years ago. He was not even born yet at the time. It is understandable that such a horrendous event left marks on the Chinese people, however, he had no part in the matter.

Nevertheless, Helen tries to educate Mona about Chinese history some more. One of the main reasons is that, according to Mona's observation, American schools teach children about US history for the most part. Mona was born in the United States and has never visited China, so she lacks knowledge about Chinese history and culture. On the other hand, Helen believes that school is not important to Mona. During Mona's heartache about Sherman leaving back to Japan, she wishes her mother to move to Chinatown, the reason being uncertain. Her mother answers. "Forget about school." "No good for a girl to be smart anyway."¹¹⁴

Helen believes that a Chinese girl does not have to be smart. Her husband's job is to be smarter in the relationship and make good money for the family. On the other hand, she often changes her opinion, creating a challenging environment for her daughters. She pressures them to work hard in the pancake house or at home in general so they can become proper housewives. However, she also wants them to attend college and study hard to become doctors, seeing that doctors are hardworking people who earn a fortune and can take care of their families when needed. Having a doctor in the family can, according to the Changs, be an advantage when parents retire, and their children can ensure them with the best medical care possible.

Mona and Helen encounter multiple differences, and they do not share the same opinion nearly every time throughout the novel. Mona is rather opinionated, which is not how Helen expects her to be. In addition, Mona has expectations about how a thoughtful mother should behave, which does not resemble Helen's behaviour at all. Mona tries to explain how a mother should support her daughter, help her with herself and her identity,

¹¹³ Ann Arbor, Documents on the Rape of Nanking (The United States of America: *The University of Michigan Press*, 2003), 1-2.

¹¹⁴ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 22.

and not control her and her actions. Nevertheless, her mother, Helen, still has the Chinese mindset she adopted from her Chinese parents, who were restricted as well.

“What you taking, find yourself?” says Helen. “And who do you think you are, tell me what to do? Daughter’s job is to listen, not to tell mother her big-shot opinion.”

“That is the whole problem. I’m not just a daughter. I’m a person.”

“A person!”

“You know what you are?” Helen says. “You are an American girl. Only an American girl can do something like that and hide it from her mother. Every day you lied to me.” She appears shocked all over again by this recap of the facts. “Every day!” She cannot go on.¹¹⁵

In this conversation between Mona and Helen, they share their opinions about Mona and her friends who attempt to help a friend in need. However, the friend is African-American. Helen expects Mona to behave according to her values. However, Mona opposes the idea that she needs to acknowledge herself as a human being, not just an obedient daughter. When arguing about Alfred, the African-American cook from their restaurant who was in serious need of shelter, Helen suggests that Mona behaves like an American girl, not sharing her Chinese values. On the contrary, she raised her to become an American girl, which leaves Mona not knowing what kind of behaviour is expected of her, especially from her mother’s side.

After Mona begins to promote black independence and wants to help African Americans, her mindset allows her to take action. Every time she comes across an obstacle, she manages. “There must be something we can do.”¹¹⁶ She believes helping others is essential. Helen does not get involved in such things. Instead, she believes that “To do nothing is better than to overdo.”¹¹⁷ This indicates that she would rather stay silent and not cause any problems than fight for what is right.

While having a conversation with Seth, Mona mentions: “I mean my parents would never even go marching for themselves, much less for a bunch of blacks.”¹¹⁸ With that, Mona explains the mindset of her Chinese parents, who, feeling secure and not affected by the issues, choose to remain silent and take no action.

When hiring new employees, Ralph and Helen must “make sure.”¹¹⁹ This means that they are suspicious of Americans, African Americans, and especially strangers. As

¹¹⁵ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 221

¹¹⁶ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 141.

¹¹⁷ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 141.

¹¹⁸ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 117.

¹¹⁹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 118.

González explains, the reason for the Changs to "make sure" is that they search for people that they can rely on. Their motto means to get used to something, to adjust, and even to assimilate.¹²⁰ According to Mona, the reason for their motto is rooted deeply in Chinese history, especially the Chinese Revolution. The Changs lived in uncertainty, not knowing information about their relatives and experiencing bomb attacks. However, they immigrated to the United States, meaning they no longer need to live in fear. Additionally, they got to experience the American Dream, own a restaurant, and be successful.

You know what you are now? She wants to say. Now you're smart shoppers. You can forget about "make sure". But in other way she understands it's like asking the Jews to get over Holocaust, or like asking the blacks to get over slavery. Once you've lost your house and your family and your country, your devil-may-care is pretty much gone too.¹²¹

Amplifying that she understands that Mona did not experience what her parents did, as a consequence, she cannot judge the actions they take and the decisions they make. If Mona faced the same or even a little similar events, she would act and think just like her parents.

Helen and Ralph do not have a good relationship with black people, especially Helen. People often compare them to each other, African Americans to Chinese people. The reasoning is that they are both minorities. However, Helen dislikes being compared to them. They moved to the United States hoping to assimilate, not to be called "You people."¹²² Even though they hoped to assimilate completely, it did not go according to what they had imagined. To assimilate means to resemble people from the host country, speak the language fluently and follow social norms, customs and traditions.¹²³

That does not ensemble Helen and Ralph's behaviour. Helen takes it very personally when a white woman comes to the restaurant with a petition, hoping to open a free birth control clinic nearby. Helen is outraged when she hears, "And of course, you people would be welcome."¹²⁴"They want to lump us with black people!"¹²⁵ Helen panics. She opposes that they, as Chinese people, work hard and that the reason they migrated to The United States was to work hard. "Those black people, they just want to make trouble."¹²⁶ On the other hand, Mona does not feel the same as her mother about black people or being called

¹²⁰ González, *The (Re)Birth of Mona Changowitz*, 230.

¹²¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 118.

¹²² Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 118.

¹²³ Henri Bunle. "The Cultural Assimilation of Immigrants." *Population Studies* 3 (1950): 5-11.

¹²⁴ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 118.

¹²⁵ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 119.

¹²⁶ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 119.

"those people." She is actually invested in the idea of free birth control, as opposed to her mother.

Helen frequently refers to African-American people as "foreign," and she gives it a negative connotation. She and her family are also foreign since they arrived from China years ago; thus, there is no need to differentiate African-Americans from Chinese-Americans; thus, they are all immigrants having come to their host country.¹²⁷

The theme of race and racism is mentioned multiple times throughout the novel. Not only do Ralph and Helen think of themselves as the better minority compared to African Americans, but additionally, they prioritize Chinese people over everyone else.

The Changs prefer to employ other Chinese immigrants as they prefer to "make sure."¹²⁸ They think of Chinese people as reliable employees who, when being spoken to, are clearly visible as the right people for their pancake restaurant. They attempt to justify this behaviour with absurd excuses. For instance, Ralph is certain that no one else would be willing to hire Cedric, one of their cooks, because he is also a Chinese immigrant. In addition, Ralph has prejudices against other African-American chefs in his restaurant. He acts based on one unpleasant experience with another African-American cook whom he had to fire due to him stealing minute steak off of a grill. Hence, he prefers hiring Chinese personnel over any other ethnicity.¹²⁹ On the other hand, Mona does not share her parent's prejudices. "It's not those black people. It's Alfred."¹³⁰ She alerts Cedric, one of the cooks in the restaurant, when he tries to blame all African Americans for being forgetful and clumsy while cooking when it is clearly due to Alfred having a horrible day. With Alfred befriending their daughter Mona and living in Barbara's parents' house, he got fired from the pancake house. The Changs fired him in order to protect Mona; however, her and Alfred's opinions on the matter differ. Ralph and Helen argued they "were not sure" about him compared to other personnel, specifically the Chinese ones. Consequently, Alfred sues the Changs for racial discrimination and firing him without a proper cause. The lawsuit is eventually dismissed as Mona apologises for herself and her parents.

Mona also finds herself needing to "make sure," but it is not related to protecting her business as her parents do. She experiences jealousy when it comes to her boyfriend, Seth. She needs to make sure he does not break her heart and that he, in a way, belongs

¹²⁷ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 240.

¹²⁸ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 118.

¹²⁹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 138-139.

¹³⁰ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 208.

to her only. The desire to “make sure” apparently comes from her parents and their Chineseness, their constant need to be in charge of factors they cannot control. Nonetheless, it is not in connection to racism and prejudices.¹³¹

Gish Jen brilliantly captures the difficulty of the position of immigrants. On one hand, they are expected to remain loyal to their home country, with their heritage, language, customs and habits. On the other hand, they are expected to assimilate completely, creating a huge issue with finding a person’s identity. The Changs are a perfect example. Helen and Ralph, the first-generation immigrants, came to the United States of America to pursue their idea of the infamous American Dream. Their idea of assimilation might differ from that of their daughter, who is a second-generation immigrant. Helen and Ralph raised their daughters to be “true American girls.” However, they have double standards. They expect them to act the Chinese way, have good manners, and stay loyal to Chinese tradition and culture. Nevertheless, they did not teach them any Chinese language; the daughters only knew words that they overheard in the parents’ conversations. Many times throughout the novel, Helen urges Mona to be “a good Chinese girl.”¹³² This way, it is not possible for the girls to completely assimilate to American standards mainly because, as Mona perfectly captured: “Everywhere else is America, but in this house it’s China!”¹³³ Emphasising the fact that her mother taught her to be American, however, in some situations, she expects Mona to act as if still in China.

Lastly, very family member of the Changs family has a different approach to assimilation. Ralph and Helen remained Chinese, thinking they had assimilated. However, they did not. They still have a Chinese mindset, but in some cases, they are willing to allow themselves to assimilate, for example, Christmas. Another occasion they are willing to give up their Chinese thinking is when their daughters consider applying to universities. In China, girls do not need to study hard; they just need to find an intelligent, hard-working husband who will provide money for them and their families.¹³⁴ Callie found her identity when she became closer to her Chinese heritage. When meeting her friend Naomi, who is interested in China, she became fascinated by the Chinese language and culture, which led to her even changing her name to her original Chinese name, Kailan. Mona, on the other hand, experimented with her identity a lot more. She struggled

¹³¹ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 190.

¹³² Bubíková, et al., *Literary Childhoods*, 99.

¹³³ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 250.

¹³⁴ Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, 22.

to find her true self, as she felt she did not belong to either “group” of people, American, Jewish, or Chinese.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Bubíková, et al., *Literary Childhoods*, 110.

Conclusion

This bachelor thesis depicts assimilation and identity in *Mona in the Promised Land*. The theoretical part explains the terms immigration and assimilation. It provides the most common reasons for migration – economic and political. It provides reasons for Chinese migration, such as the Gold Rush, 1848.

The next chapter differentiates the first-generation from second-generation immigrants. First-generation immigrants decided to leave their home country at some point in their lives and migrate to their host country. Second-generation immigrants are children of the first generation born in the host country. There are four types of immigrants, depending on how much they assimilated – “separation, marginalization, integration, assimilation.” The following chapter provides cultural and historical background on immigration and assimilation, the metaphor “melting pot”, and hyphenated Americans.

The analysis of the novel *Mona in the Promised Land* begins with brief information about the author Gish Jen and her other literary works – *Who Is Irish?* and *Typical American*. Next, it analyses the main protagonist, Mona, who is a Chinese American girl who fails to find her identity. She feels like she does not fit in the typical American society and struggles to assimilate. She believes she has finally found her identity as she converts to Judaism. However, some people are outraged, her mother, for example, that it is not possible for a Chinese girl to become Jewish. As she continues her quest for identity, she meets Seth, her future husband, who helps her find herself as she faces difficulties fitting in with her peers. Not identifying with her culture, race and ethnicity, she receives help from her friends. Her mother, however, does not support her daughter’s identity, mainly due to religion.

Other characters in the novel also give their input on Mona’s situation. Some of them, for example, Mona’s sister Callie, experience a quest for an identity of their own. Callie became more Chinese than her immigrant parents due to coming in contact with Chinese at Harvard University. Her parents want to assimilate; however, they are not able to entirely due to their prejudices against other immigrants or American citizens. Mona finally comes to terms with her true identity, as mentioned in the novel’s epilogue. She and Seth accept the name “Changowitz,” accepting her Chinese and Jewish identity.

The chapter concerning differences in parenting in China and the United States of America shows that parenting is entirely different, as shown in Mona and her friend

Barbara. Additionally, Mona experiences the downside of Chinese parenting as her mother slaps her, and she runs away from home.

Finally, the last chapter analyses the novel's cultural assimilation and depicts how Helen and Ralph react to different situations. They want to assimilate; however, they are not able to entirely due to their prejudices against other immigrants, African-Americans or other American citizens. Lastly, the thesis explains how the author, Gish Jen, perfectly captures the challenging part of assimilation and the need to fit into society but not being able to.

Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce s názvem „Znázornění kulturní identity a asimilace v románu *Mona in the Promised Land* od autorky Gish Jenové“ se věnuje analýze románu „*Mona in the Promised Land*“ od čínsko-americké autorky Gish Jenové. Hlavním tématem práce je kulturní identita, především hlavní postavy románu, Mony Changové. Práce je rozdělena do dvou částí. První část práce se zabývá historicko-kulturním kontextem. Druhá část práce se věnuje detailní analýze daného románu.

První kapitola teoretické části se zabývá pojmy imigrace a kulturní asimilace. Je zde vysvětleno, z jakého důvodu lidé nejčastěji migrují ze své rodné země. Tímto důvodem nejčastěji bývají sociální a politické změny v jejich rodné zemi, které motivují občany k opuštění této země. Dalšími poměrně obvyklými důvody bývá špatná ekonomická situace či válečné konflikty. Tyto důvody se nazývají faktory tlaku a tahu, které přitahují a odpuzují migranty. Jako další je v této kapitole popsána historie čínské migrace do Spojených států amerických a důvody, které k čínské migraci přispěly, jako například Kalifornská zlatá horečka, 1848-1855.

Dále kapitola obsahuje rozdíly mezi první a druhou generací imigrantů. Největší rozdíl mezi první a druhou generací je, že imigranti první generace se narodili ve své rodné zemi a během jejich života se rozhodli, že se odstěhují do země jiné. Imigranti druhé generace jsou dětmi první generace, takže se narodili až po přistěhování do nové země. Imigranti se rozdělují do čtyř skupin, které se dělí podle úrovně integrace. První skupinou jsou imigranti, kteří zůstali kompletně věrní své rodné zemi a neasimilují se. Této skupině se říká „izolování“. Druhá skupina se neidentifikuje ani s kulturou jejich rodné země ani s kulturou země, do které imigrovali. Tomuto jevu se říká „přehlížení“. Další skupinou jsou lidé, kteří si přivlastnili kulturu a jazyk své rodné ale i nové země a úplně se začlenili. Poslední skupinou jsou imigranti, kteří převzali nové tradice, a postupně ztrácejí kulturu své rodné země. Tomuto jevu se říká asimilace.

Druhá kapitola se stručně zabývá kulturním a historickým kontextem. Kapitola vysvětluje metaforu „melting pot“ („tavící kotlík“), která se proslavila kvůli Israeli Zangwillovi a jeho divadelní hře, kde se metafora poprvé objevila.

Třetí kapitola teoretické části přibližuje literární díla čínsko-americké autorky Gish Jen. Kromě analyzovaného díla *Mona in the Promised Land*, napsala Gish Jen mnoho dalších knih, které poukazují na podobnou tematiku asimilace, imigrace a identity. Mezi její další díla patří například „*Typical American*“ a nebo „*Who Is Irish?*“ Kniha

„Typical American“ popisuje život rodičů Changových před i po útěku z Číny do Spojených států amerických.

V praktické části se práce zabývá analýzou románu „Mona in the Promised Land“. Kniha přibližuje život rodiny Changových, kteří žijí ve Spojených státech amerických jako čínští imigranti. Rodiče Helen a Ralph vychovávají dvě dcery, Monu a Callie. Mona ale zápasí s hledáním své identity. Jako jediná čínská dívka si připadá, že ve škole nezapadá. Vymýšlí si, že je pravá Číňanka, aby ji lidé považovali za zajímavou. Pravdou je, že si jako Číňanka vůbec nepřipadá a vše jen předstírá. Poté se připojí se k ke skupině kamarádů, kteří jsou Židové. Monu toto náboženství osloví a konvertuje s pocitem, že konečně najde sama sebe. Práce tedy analyzuje Mony zoufalé hledání identity.

V další části se práce zajímá o hlavní postavy a jejich postavení k asimilaci, identitě, náboženství a ke kulturnímu dědictví. V části, která se věnuje hlavní postavě Moně, je popsán její vztah k rodičům a to, jak se v různých problematikách liší jejich názory. Důvodem toho, proč mají jiné názory je to, že Mona byla vychována jako Američanka, ale její rodiče od ní očekávají chování podle čínských hodnot. Mona se tedy snaží vyhovět všem, ať už rodičů nebo svým vrstevníkům. Práce také vysvětluje, jaké kroky Mona učinila, aby našla svoji pravou identitu. Jedním z kroků bylo například konvertování k judaismu.

Monině sestře se věnuje druhá část kapitoly o hlavních postavách. Callie, stejně jako Mona, bojovala s nalezením své identity, ale oproti Moně se s tímto problémem vypořádala úplně po svém. Callie byla jejími rodiči odepřena část své identity tím, že ji vychovávali „americkým stylem“. Poté práce vysvětluje, jak k jejímu vypořádání s identitou přispěla její kamarádka z vysoké školy Naomi. Během jejího studia se dostane totiž do styku s čínštinou a čínskou kulturou, která ji velmi upoutá. Z tohoto důvodu se přiblíží k její čínské identitě více než její rodiče první generace imigrantů.

Následující kapitoly se věnují postavám Shermana, Seta a Moniných rodičů. Část o Shermanovi popisuje jeho vliv na Monu jako imigrant z Japonska, který jí pomůže při porozumění její asijské etnicity. Seth také přispěje k budování její identity. Jako její přítel a budoucí manžel jí pomohl dospět a začít se cítit jako žena. Kapitola dále popisuje rozdíly, které mezi sebou Mona a Seth mají, jako „Číňan a Američan,“ a ukazuje tyto rozdíly na příkladech z knihy. Úsek o Moniných rodičích poukazuje na rozdílný přístup k výchově oproti americkým rodičům. Dále popisuje, jak se rodiče vlastně vůbec necítí

jako imigranti, protože ti se podle nich chovají úplně jinak. Zároveň se ale necítí jako praví Američané, protože se chtějí asimilovat, ale zatím toho nejsou schopni.

V následující kapitole se práce zabývá identitou. Pomocí úryvků z knihy poukazuje na Moninu snahu o pochopení své osobnosti, konvertování k judaismu, etnicitě, dospívání, asimilaci a také hlavně nalezené své pravé identity. Popisuje také, jak si Mona připadá, že nezapadá ani do jedné kategorie – Číňanka, Američanka ani židovka. Dále práce vysvětluje, jak k porozumění její barvy pleti přispějí Alfred a Naomi. Nakonec práce dojde k závěru, že všechny tyto situace pomohly Moně k nalezení své identity. Mona je popisuje jako věci, které si neobjednala, ale stejně dorazily.

Další kapitola se zabývá rozdíly mezi čínskou a americkou výchovou. Tím, jakým stylem byla vychována Mony kamarádka Barbara, poukazuje na to, že i když rodiče tvrdí, že vychovali Monu podle „Americké výchovy“, není tomu tak. Dále analyzuje vztah mezi rodiči a jejichmi dcerami, Monou a Callie. Zároveň ale řeší neshody, které Mona měla s její matkou, a při konfrontaci vyvrcholila až k útěku z domů.

Poslední kapitola se zabývá kulturní asimilací, která probíhala v románu, popisující zachování Helen a Ralpa v různých situacích, které se týkají zařazení do americké společnosti. Kapitola obsahuje také historické informace, které vysvětlují chování Changových. Těmito informacemi jsou například situace spojené se Světovou válkou nebo Čínskou kulturní revolucí. Kvůli těmto důvodům, má obzvláště Helen předsudky vůči určitým skupinám lidí, což ji znemožňuje asimilaci do americké multikulturní společnosti. Helen a Ralph trpí tím, že si vždy „musí být jistí“, což znamená, že upřednostňují imigranty z Číny nad lidmi ze Spojených států amerických. Závěrem bakalářská práce popisuje přístupy postav k asimilaci, a jakým způsobem autorka Gish Jen vyobrazuje náročnost asimilace a pocit, kdy imigrant není schopen zapadnout do společnosti.

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Appendix

Gish Jen, born in 1955 in New York, was the second of five siblings. She was originally named Lillian Jen, but later on, she changed her name to Gish Jen because the name was too bland for her taste. She took the name after an actress named Lillian Gish. Gish Jen was born to Chinese immigrant parents living in the U.S.A. Her parents decided to move from Shanghai, China, to New York in the 1940s. During her childhood, the family moved to a primarily Jewish suburb of Scarsdale, New York. Here, she got access to a bigger library, which led to her love for reading, writing poetry and becoming a literary editor for her school's magazine.¹³⁶

As mentioned in the MELUS Interview, the literary magazine was one of the most significant experiences of her childhood, and it motivated her to write her first story.¹³⁷ Her parents' expectations for future occupations were high for her, so she attended Harvard. However, she enrolled into an English class, which she fell in love with, and it got her into writing. Later, she left Harvard because she was trying to be a publisher. However, she realized she was unhappy and enrolled in an M.B.A. program at Stanford. Eventually, she also dropped out of this school, disappointing her parents, who even cut off her finances and did not contact her for a year. Later, she graduated from Iowa in 1983. After marrying her husband, David O'Connor, she did not devote much time to her writing career. She was patient and later was awarded a fellowship at Radcliffe's Bunting Institute. Then, she finally started to work on her first novel. Her childhood inspired this side of her novels and became an essential aspect of her writing career.

However, as she mentions in the MELUS Interview, the Chang family does not depict her own family, and Mona is not her autobiography. She believes that the character Mona is someone she would have loved to be when she was her age, but she was not because she was somewhat traumatized by everything.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Don Lee, "About Gish Jen," *Ploughshares* 26, No. 2/3 (Fall 2000): 217.

¹³⁷ Yuko Matsakawa, "MELUS Interview: Gish Jen," *MELUS* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 116-117.

¹³⁸ Don Lee, "About Gish Jen," *Ploughshares* 26, No. 2/3 (Fall 2000): 218-219.