

# THE PROBLEM OF AMERICAN BORN CHINESE'S INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE AS SEEN IN *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract: One thing that commonly happens in a multiracial country is interracial marriage, like what happens in America. As a multiracial country, America is a place where there are people with different races, ethnic and culture, who interact and mix with each other. In an interracial, a couple usually has to face cultural problems from their families or society, who reject the interracial marriage. This article will discuss about the interracial marriage rejection, which is divided into two reasons. The first reason is the different cultures and the second reason is the generation gap it holds.*

*Key words: Interracial marriage, multiracial, generation gap.*

## INTRODUCTION

America is a multicultural country in which many races live. It is said that long before it became an independent country, what is referred to "America" is a country, which consists of a multiethnic society. It means that the multiculturalism of America has been shaped since the first new comers came to America to shape its colonies. Those colonies were shaped with their uniqueness of the new comers' origin cultures. In his book, *They and We*, Rose (1997:5) explains that there are a lot of new settlers or

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immigrants from different countries with different reasons who had come into America - the "New World", a place of hope. Some of them came to escape from war such as the Vietnamese, religious discrimination such as the Jews, political dictatorship such as the Cubans, or economic deprivation such as the Italians; and for others, the journey to America had been the beginning of a new exciting adventure. Even though they had different reasons, the aim of their coming was the same; they wanted to get a better life in America.

The growth of America's various cultural backgrounds represents the important element in the social life of this country as a multicultural country. With so many ethnics living in America, both the immigrants and the natives have to face adjustment problems. As mentioned by Rowan and Mazie on their article, one of the problems in America is adjustment:

It is not easy for anyone when immigrants move into a new community. Foreigners must struggle to keep their own culture while blending into a new one and the residents must learn to tolerate strange customs and additional competition (1983:49-54).

Due to many new comers in America, slowly but surely they formed two different groups of citizen, "the majority" and "the minority". The white people or the Anglo-Saxon, which is 83% of the total citizens, is usually called as the "majorities". On the other hand, the Blacks, the Asians, the Indians and the other races are usually called such as "the minorities", because their amount is only 17%. One of the "minorities" ethnic that lives in America is the Chinese. They live in some cities such as San Francisco and New York. The different culture with that of the Americans makes the Chinese as the new comers usually face difficulties in adapting themselves (Hsu, 1953: xv).

In facing the adjustment problem, both the immigrants and the natives do some actions as their effort to assimilate. Some of them try to learn the new culture, some others try to blend themselves into the new culture. One thing that often happens in the assimilation effort is interracial marriage.

The interracial marriage commonly happens in a multiracial country. It is a product of assimilation. A couple with different races, cultures or even religion tries to live together and receive each other, but it is not easy for both of them. Besides the problem of different cultures that they face, they also have to face the interracial marriage rejection. There are two reasons for

the interracial marriage rejection, the first is a prejudice that is caused by different races and cultures and the second is the different view of the two generations that is caused by the generation gap.

## THE INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE REJECTION AND DIFFERENT RACES

The interracial marriage rejection can come from one or both sides. From the family's sides or from the society, and it also can come from the minority's side or from the majority's side. Hsu, a Chinese American anthropologist and also the writer of *American Chinese: Passage to Differences*, has a comment about the interracial marriage rejection. He says:

The existence in many American states of specific legal prohibitions to interracial marriage reflects the underlying general pressure against it....

This [is] fear[s] of loss of race- the fear of any alteration of the general racial picture- ...(1953: 356-7).

Why do people fear that they will lose their race? There is a statement in *Intisari* that each race believes that his or her own culture is better than the others' (November 1994:108). Usually people will have a pride of their race, this pride makes them fear of race loss. Yet because of the interracial marriage, their race will be mixed with others' race. That is why some people cannot receive the idea of interracial marriage.

Besides the fear of race loss, another thing that support the rejection of interracial marriage is prejudice. Prejudices influence the natives' views about the immigrants. Some of the natives who have prejudice do some actions against the immigrants such as rejecting the interracial marriage. The word prejudice, refers to Allport's definition that is quoted by Zanden in his book, *The Social Experience: An Introduction to Sociology* as an

attitude of aversion and hostility toward the members of a group simply because they belong to it and so are presumed to have the objectionable qualities that are ascribed to it (1988: 258).

Thus, the prejudice generally rises up in the host society. Zanden also quotes a theory of four feelings from Blumer:

...four feelings typically characterize dominant group members:  
1) a sense that they are superior to members of the minority group;  
2) a feeling that minority members are by their nature different and alien;  
3) a sense that dominant group members have a proprietary claim on privilege, power, and prestige; and 4) a fear and suspicion that members of the minority have designs on dominant group benefits (1998:258).

Which means to say that in this respect, prejudice frequently reflects a sense of group position. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Rose's marriage becomes one of the main theme. It is told that Rose is a Chinese American. She marries Ted Jordan, a Caucasian. Their marriage, however receives a contradictory treatment from both Ted's family and Rose's family.

Ted's family belongs to the Caucasian's group. In America, they are grouped as the majority group. While Rose's family are Chinese. Even though they have lived in America for more than twenty years, and even though Rose feels that she herself is already an American too, because she is born and raised in America, Ted's family, however especially his mother feels that their condition are not the same.

The Caucasian as the dominant group in America may have some feelings as the superior or the majority, or have a prestige as the majority. So, Ted's mother becomes fearful, that her son's career will get a bad influence because of his marriage with an Asian girl. The feeling of superiority or the feeling that immigrants are aliens can be indicated as a fear of race loss, too. On the other hand, for the same reason, the interracial marriage rejection also comes from the Chinese. Tan shows that at the beginning An Mei – Rose's mother – also rejects her daughter and Ted's marriage.

Seventeen years ago she was chagrined when I started dating Ted. My older sisters had dated only Chinese boys from church before getting married (Tan, 1989: 123).

Actually, for the Chinese, the interracial marriage's problem is more sensitive and complex. They do not only frown on marriage with foreigners- Japanese as well as Mongols or Asians, Europeans and Americans as well as Caucasians – but some of them even object to marriage between Chinese from two different regions such as the Cantonese people with Hakkas people- who are Chinese but speak a different dialect (Hsu, 1953: 355). In *The Joy Luck Club* Tan also lifts this problem. She shows how the Chinese feel



pride of their own regions. Lindo is a Taiyuanese, while her husband, Tin Jong, is a Cantonese. They are introduced by An Mei Hsu. From the first time Lindo meets Tin Jong she does not like him just because he is a Cantonese.

I knew something was not right when I saw him: he was Cantonese!  
How could An Mei think I could marry such a person? (Tan 1989: 300).

From the illustrations above, we could have a view about the Chinese's feeling of the interracial marriage. Although a minority, they are difficult to receive people with different region more over people with different races. They think that white people, the Caucasians are a *waigoren*, a stranger. Even though they have lived in America for more than twenty years, they still feel and have pride that they are Chinese.

## THE INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE REJECTION AND GENERATION GAP

Besides the prejudice and different culture that become the problem of interracial marriage, the different views between two generations also support the interracial marriage rejection. According to Scollon and Scollon (1995:222) in their book, *Intercultural Communication: a Discourse Approach*, the generations in America are grouped into four generations, they are:

Authoritarians	1914-28	72-86 years of age in 2000
Depression/war	1929-45	55-71 years of age in 2000
Baby Boom	1946-64	36-54 years of age in 2000
Infochild	1965-80	under years of age 36 in 2000

The characters in *The Joy Luck Club* can be grouped into two groups. The mothers who are born in 1920's are considered under the Authoritarians group, and the children who are born in 1950's are in Baby Boom group. According to Scollon and Scollon, the authoritarian generations' view of the world is dominated by war. They are born during World War I, in the early time of their adult transitions (around eighteen to twenty one years of age). They face World War II just as they come into their mid life transition period. Then when the war in Vietnam broke out, the Baby Boom generations are born in the post-war period.

The different era of life makes those two different Chinese American generations have different views of life. The Authoritarian group experiences some wars. This condition can make the feel traumatic with strangers. They loss their faith to strangers and it causes the feeling of prejudice. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan shows how Ted's mother rejects Rose. In this sample, Tan wants to say that the Vietnam War have influenced the American's feelings about Asians, because it was the first time for America to be lost in a war battle. The cruelty of war and the trauma of war loss made Ted's mother have a high prejudice to the Vietnamese as well as the Chinese because she thinks that both groups are the same, i.e. both are Asians. The following quotation from the novel supports this notion:

She assured me she had nothing whatsoever against minorities... she and her husband, who owned a chain of office supply stores personally knew many fine people who were oriental, Spanish, and even Black. But Ted was going to be in one of those professions where he would be judged by different standards...She said it was so unfortunate the way the rest of the world war was, how unpopular the Vietnam was (Tan 1989: 124-125).

If the mothers have difficulties to adapt themselves into the American culture, in opposition, the daughters are easier to assimilate with the Americans. From the four daughters, three of them, Lena, Rose and Waverly decided to marry to the American Caucasians. Lena marries to Harold Livotny, Rose marries to Ted Jordan, and Waverly marries to Rich Schields. They marry for love. It means they can adapt themselves well. It is different from the mothers. The only mother who was married to a Caucasian is Ying-Ying, but she does not marry for love. She has her opinion about her husband, Clifford St. Clair as follows:

Saint courted me for four years in his strange way. Even though I was not the owner of the shop, he always greetes me, shaking hands, holding them too long. From his palm water always poured, even after we married. He was clean and pleasant. But he smelled like a foreigner, a lamb-smell-stink that can never be washed away (ibid, 1989:284).

## **CONCLUSION**

In brief, the young generation usually can receive the interracial marriage, because they can adapt themselves into American culture easier. They feel that they are American so they don't have any problems in marrying the white American. It seems, the problem of interracial marriage could disappear only if the process of assimilation between the minority and the majority goes well.

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