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A Map Through Chinatown: ethnicity and cultural identity in

Lawrence Yep's Child of the Owl

While first reading Child of the Owl, I became fascinated with the idea of Chinatown, and what it represents in terms of borders and boundaries, freedoms and limitations, ethnicity and assimilation. Each of the main characters in this novel are affected by their relationship to their ethnic heritage, a heritage that they either resist or accept. To the extent that they resist and are cut off from this heritage, the characters suffer a lack of identity and a sense of belonging, either within their own ethnic community or within the larger community of early 1960's America. For this extension paper, I will be re-examining this novel, paying close attention to the characters of Casey, the novel's young protagonist; Barney, her father; Phil, her none-too-avuncular uncle; and the character of Paw-Paw, Casey's maternal grandmother. While looking at these characters, particularly Casey, I will be examining their relationships to their cultural heritage as ethnic Chinese, particularly the "maps" or the methods by which they understand their ethnic identity.

When we first meet Casey, she is disconnected from her cultural heritage as a Chinese, but equally disconnected from the larger American culture by virtue of her ethnicity. In fact, she is in the process of being disconnected from her familiar family life (such as it is) entirely, as her father is in the hospital after being beaten and robbed while

leaving his bookie. She has to sneak into the hospital to even see him at all, and afterwards must go live with her mother's brother and his wife and daughter, a family whose desperation to fully assimilate would be comic if it were not so tragic. We get the first hints of her relationship to her cultural heritage in these opening pages as we discover that she and Barney live lives that are completely disconnected from the Chinese community.

But the nurse couldn't tell that Barney was pulling her leg. "You are the only Chinese on this floor." I pretended to stare down at Barney in horror. "Gosh, I hope it isn't catching." (p. 8).

As they part, Barney passes to Casey the one vestige of his cultural heritage that he still has in his possession, a tourist statue of a fat, bald, Chinese god of luck. "Barney didn't know anymore about the little man than what was stamped on the plastic of his back: Happy God – Souvenir of Chinatown" (p. 5). Not only does Barney have no real connection to the cultural meaning of his "good luck charm," the charm itself has no real connection to Chinatown, much less China. "When you turned it over, though, the bottom was stamped: Made in Hoboken" (p. 5). As tenuous as this cultural legacy is, it is worlds beyond what she will receive during her time as a quite unwelcome guest at the house of her Uncle Phil.

Phil has distanced himself from his Chinese cultural heritage every bit as much as Barney. The difference between Barney and his former brother-in-law is that while Barney has fallen through the cracks in the "American Dream," Phil has pursued this dream with all the enthusiasm of a modern day Don Quixote, and has filled his life with the trappings and symbols of what he believes a successful American life should be. It

is not a particular good fit for him, however, and he alternates between being a comic and a tragic figure. One of the first signs we see of his drive to acquire the “keys” to the American dream is his key ring itself, full of keys to “honorary brotherhoods and fraternities: Rotarians, Kiwanis, Odd Fellows and so on” (p.12) His house is expensive, but impersonal, appearing as if it had “all been ordered out of a Sears catalogue because that was what every other lawyer of fifty thousand a year ordered from San Francisco to Bangor” (p.13). The people living inside this house, are equally impersonal and unpleasant and I began to suspect that if the Durstley’s allowed Harry Potter to stay with acquaintances, this the household to which they would send him.

While Phil is presented on the surface as an extremely unsympathetic character, Yep gradually reveals to us Phil’s inner emptiness and we begin to see how his desperate clutching at the trappings of a “successful” Western life is nothing more than his attempt to fill the void left by the loss of his cultural heritage and his lack of any deeper identity. We see some of what motivates Phil toward the end of the novel when Casey reflects on his behavior during his weekly visits to Paw-Paw’s apartment in Chinatown.

He’d be sitting there with his cigarette, chain-smoking and talking about the new rugs they were getting or asking her if she liked his new suit. Then suddenly he’d break off in the middle of a sentence to hop to the window to check on his Lincoln double-parked in the alley. The slightest noise – a kid shouting, a whir of pigeon wings – had him out of his seat and checking the paint job. It was like there was nothing he valued inside of himself; it was only the things outside – like he could make up for being empty inside by having a lot of stuff outside (pp. 198-199).

Ironically it is Phil who sets in motion Casey's journey toward a discovery of her own cultural identity, not by leading her there himself, but by banishing her from his household. Finding her impossible to deal with, he sends her off to Chinatown to live with his mother, who is Casey's grandmother or "Paw-Paw." While entering Chinatown, Casey experiences a sense of dislocation as she begins to leave behind the familiar Western world and enter a world in which she is an ethnic insider yet a cultural outsider.

Suddenly, I felt I was lost. Like I was going on this trip to this place I had always heard about and I was on the only road to that place but the signs kept telling me I was going to some other place. When I looked in the glove compartment to check my maps, I found I'd brought the wrong set of maps. And the road was too narrow to turn around in and there was too much traffic anyway so I just had to keep going....and getting more and more lost (p. 27)

I love this passage in the book and whenever I read it, I am reminded of the thirteenth of Adrienne Rich's "Twenty One Love Poems."

The rules break like a thermometer,  
quicksilver spills across the charted systems,  
we're out in a country that has no language  
no laws, we're chasing the raven and the wren  
through gorges unexplored since dawn  
whatever we do together is pure invention  
the maps they gave us were out of date  
by years.... (Rich, p. 31)

Like the woman in the poem, Casey does not have the luxury of accurate maps. She has had no experience in what it means to be Chinese, and to be a part of a long chain of cultural history. Luckily for her, she has a good guide in the character of Paw-Paw, and with the help of her grandmother is able to explore the alleys and back streets of Chinatown, both physically and spiritually and is thus able to create new maps for herself and discover a way of being in the world that does not leave her empty and adrift.

In many ways, Casey is as much an outsider to the people and the rhythms of Chinatown as she would have been if she was not ethnically Chinese. She is so disconnected from her ethnic identity, that she has not even thought herself as being Chinese, in the sense of looking different from other mainstream Americans.

I knew more about race horses than I new about myself – I mean myself as a Chinese. I looked at my hands, thinking they couldn't be my hands, and then I closed my eyes and felt their outline, noticing the tiny fold of flesh at the corners. Maybe it was because I thought of myself as an American and all Americans were supposed to be white like on TV or in books or in movies, but now I felt like some mad scientist had switched bodies on me like in all those monster movies, so that I had woken up in wrong one (p. 27).

In her new school, she finds that she is expected to already understand some Chinese and as she does not, she cannot keep up in her Chinese language class. When she struggles, she is told by her unsympathetic teacher, “That no good. You...you think too much ‘Merican. Not think Chinese” (p. 41).

Her experience in school is repeated as she slowly begins to revise her internal ethnic maps and grow more accustomed to thinking of herself as Chinese. In spite of her

new acceptance and her efforts to connect with her cultural heritage, she continually finds herself in situations where she is perceived as an outsider. When she goes shopping to surprise Paw-Paw with what she believes to be a traditional supper, she grows increasingly frustrated as she encounters hostility from the Chinese shop owners.

I took the two and paid for them, feeling hot and frustrated inside and thinking that if I had ordered in Chinese, they might have given me what I wanted, or at least explained the situation to me. But to them I was an outsider (p. 139).

This shopping trip provokes a crisis of identity in Casey. She has let go of one identity – that of herself as a mainstream American westerner – and now finds that she cannot easily assume the new identity that she is seeking – that of an ethnic Chinese connected to the culture and heritage of the Chinese community. She has become for all intents and purposes parentless, and now she finds herself cultureless as well.

It finally hit me that even though I looked Chinese and had learned some of the myths and a little bit of the language, I'd never really fit into Chinatown the way that Jeanie [her mother] had. I couldn't even be like her in being Chinese (p. 137).

With time, and with the help of her grandmother and her grandmother's friends, as well as with her own reluctant friendship with a neighboring girl, Casey begins to grow into a new acceptance of her place both in Chinatown and in the world at large. She slowly learns new customs and begins to grow in emotional strengths as she learns not only to accept but to take strength in her growing sense of cultural identity.

So maybe I couldn't be much like Jeanie had been; maybe I couldn't even be as Chinese as her. But somehow I think that Jeanie would have agreed with Paw-

Paw when she told me to be myself. I think Jeanie would have liked me for not imitating her but for being what I was and that meant I couldn't turn my back on being Chinese – no matter what Barney had said (p. 141).

As her own awareness of what it means to be Chinese grows, she begins to learn more about her father's own struggles with his ethnic identity and to begin to see him more fully. She tracks down an old friend of his and learns how his once bright and promising life became derailed by unmet expectations, failures, and disappointments, many of which were caused by his reactions to the prejudice he encountered as an ethnic Chinese in American society.

He took it for maybe ten years, but it was eating away at him inside. And then, oh, I guess about the time the war ended, he said, to hell with it. See, it was like there was a brick wall in front of us. Some guys like me knew we couldn't get past it so we never tried. And you got your other guys who just went on beating their heads against it for years and years, but it was like Barney gave up because he'd paid his dues and now somebody owed him something (p. 108).

Barney is every bit as hollowed and emptied by his failure as Phil has been by his apparent success. Both men have turned their back on their cultural identity, and both men have paid a high emotional price for this disconnection. Each is adrift and rootless, and Casey realizes that neither one of them can offer her any true way of being in the world.

You want to hear a crazy story, Barney? I'll tell you one. There's a whole bunch of people who like to pretend they're nothing but machines and that makes them feel so empty inside that they have to live in big houses, even penthouses, that

they fill up with lots of junk, and the more junk they got, the bigger they feel. But what makes it sad is that they're not machines at all, but people, Barney, flesh-and-blood people. (p.203).

By the end of the novel, Casey has grown into a sense of connectedness, both with her self and with her family and with her sense of what it means to be culturally identified with her ethnicity. She has come to more fully understand her father, both in his failings and in his strengths, and has settled into a life with Paw-Paw in Chinatown in which she feels whole and complete, no longer alien or adrift.

I heard the other people starting to come home, their voices growing in number and volume, and they didn't sound strange to me at all. Instead it was reassuring like the surging of the sea at high tide, rising louder and higher (p.213).

She is no longer lost in Chinatown, either literally or figuratively, but has created a new set of maps to guide her, and found a new community which nurtures her and gives her strength.

Outside I could see Talia and the Pachinko and Mr. Jeh standing around talking to one another. Remembering how they all tried to help me, I knew I wasn't alone. And for a moment I felt what Mr. Jeh had said that first time I had met him in the square: I could feel the earth in Chinatown holding me up and it was like up to now, I'd only been placed above it without taking or giving any support.

Chinatown was the first place I'd ever had roots in because Barney and I had always been too busy before this to stay put. And roots could be a pesky thing holding you down, or they could feed you and let you grow strong until it came

time to leave. I turned to face the hospital again. “I’m getting to like it here” (p. 195).

Laurence Yep has never written a sequel to Child of the Owl, but I can easily imagine the Casey that we would find within its pages. We would see a woman comfortable in both her Chinese skin and in her identity as an American. Chinatown will nurture her and make her stronger, and the maps she creates here will guide her equally as well within its boundaries as in the world outside its streets. When she discovers that it is time to leave, she will pass comfortably through the streets of Chinatown and walk freely into the world outside. Laurence Yep has not written this novel, but I wish he would.

## Bibliography

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