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ENGL384: New Brown America

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Generational Gaps in the Chinese-American Community

Feeling constant pressure to assimilate, the Asian immigrant community in the United States is facing a unique cultural challenge. A large dissociation is arising between first, second, and third generation immigrants, prompting a disconnect between immigrants and their children in their American standing. As this disconnect grows larger, perceptions of Asian-American culture within the modern American climate are founded on their ability to assimilate into 'American-ness'. Eddie Huang explores this disconnect and his journey of finding his balance of living as a second-generation Chinese-American while maintaining a steady relationship with his culture. "Fresh Off the Boat" highlights generational differences between second-generation Chinese-Americans and their parents, demonstrating the ways in which whiteness is undermining Chinese identity and driving apart cultural ties in later generations.

In exploring his relationship with Chinese identity and 'American-ness', Huang explains the differences between himself and his parents, demonstrating generational gaps and connections to Chinese culture. For Asian immigrants, America promised opportunity. It promised cultural freedom, it promised working as a cohesive unit in the golden land. Meanwhile, their children are seeing the realities of these promises. The picture is painted—Eddie sits down for lunch, a child unaware of the institutional biases that have already been set up against him. He opens his lunch and is met with the all too familiar American reaction,

confusion followed by a lack of effort to understand followed by disdain. At this point, Eddie does not understand that their reaction was based off of a direct hate for anything that didn't bleed red, white, and blue, but their reaction excluded him from being like them, something he very badly wanted to achieve. He writes, "By that point, I was ready to convert. I wanted to be white so fucking bad. But then dinner happened" (25). No matter the backlash he felt from his peers, Eddie could not, and did not want to shake his Chinese roots, "That's what I love about Chinese homes: you're never allowed to forget where you came from".

From an early age, Eddie knew the stakes pinned against him and the other Chinese children; it was either act more white or be pinned as other. This narrative differed from that of their parents. Growing up surrounded by continuous pressure to 'act more American', the reality of what it meant to be Chinese in America was apparent. The promises made to Chinese immigrants about life in America did not include the subtext. In order to be granted the promised opportunity and cohesive progression, you had to look white, and if you couldn't look white, you had to act white. For second-generation children, this meant being able to talk to their classmates and make friends and to do this meant relating to their interests. Huang writes, "There were so many gaps in my American cultural understanding because we just didn't get it at home," (46) demonstrating the divide constructed by a white hegemony between itself and Chinese culture. In order to become friends with the white children, he must first learn the things they know and speak about the things that they do. But Chinese households are not the same as white households, in the same way that they are not the same as black households. Unlike the other white students had bonded together, Eddie and other Chinese children remained under the pressure of fitting in with them while remaining othered; they didn't express a strong sense of

identity amongst themselves or with another group. He says it is not like he “wanted people to carry around little red books to affirm their “Chinese-ness,” (73) but he wanted to either fit in with Chinese culture like his parents or at least somewhere.

The expectation placed on second-generation Chinese immigrants has been that they will work harder to leave the traditions and customs set up in their households and relate more to an identity that was not originally theirs. Huang remarks that many Chinese children are doing this willingly and the disconnect between their habitual routines and interests is growing farther apart from their parents’. He writes, “African slaves were forced by threat of physical punishment to abandon their native languages, but a lot of us just gave ours up with a shrug” (157). Language carries distinguishing cultural intricacies that act to connect a group of peoples together, especially for immigrant communities in a majority English-speaking country. Thrown into a completely different environment and way of life, language brings communities a sense of comfort and familiarity. However, for the Chinese-American community there has been a noticeable separation between the first, second, and third generations in fluency of their parents, or grandparents, first language. The Migration Policy Institute reports that 7.8% of first-generation Chinese-Americans spoke only English while that number jumps to 26% amongst the second generation and 91% in the third. Huang sees this phenomena contributed to a narrative similar to that fed to the first generation, “come to America and you will have opportunity and success”. Only now the line reads, “trade in your Chinese-ness for American-ness and you will have opportunity and success”.

“Fresh Off the Boat” explores the challenges of balancing an active and supportive role in family while being placed under constant pressure to assimilate. Language is again used to

demonstrate the tear between second-generation Chinese children in their parents in traditionally 'American' settings: "My mom had this habit of speaking Chinese in front of Americans. She didn't give a fuck that they probably thought it was rude. I was caught in the middle [...] The older generation never felt integrated in society anyway so they don't care if you see them as 'rude'. I mean, hot damn, 'rude' is probably a compliment compared to the shit people used to say to them. This is our language and it's your problem if you don't speak it, right?" (207). In this, the audience sees the internal struggle Huang has between understanding the hardships his parents have faced in coming to America and feeling uncomfortable because of the 'American-ness' that he's been taught is desirable. He recognizes that he should not feel uncomfortable, that there should be no shame in his mom practicing something that's *hers*, yet what he is told every day from people outside of his family and what is portrayed on billboards and television and executive boards tells him differently.

For second-generation Chinese-Americans, a complex relationship arises between their Chinese roots and shared knowledge from their parents along with American customs and expectations in their formative environment. For second-generation children, small talk still seems to focus on their foreignness. Whether it be the reaction to Eddie's lunch or remarks to "Go back to China!", a place many of these children have never been, the sense of othering persists. The attitude towards second-generation children in America says that they cannot enjoy their heritage and culture without being pinned to a faraway country. Huang articulates that this attitude often made him unaware of the amount of pressure to assimilate that was placed on him. He writes, "Usually I wasn't so vocal about Asian identity, but without my parents around, I felt a sudden duty to say something myself. It's funny how annoying I thought my mom was, but as

soon as she wasn't around, I carried the torch for her" (176). In this statement, Huang is recognizing the differences in expectations placed on himself and his parents. The children of immigrants are more or less given a choice, they can assimilate or they can be pinned as other; Eddie's mother was never given this choice. Without his mother around, Eddie Huang recognizes this generational separation that has been forced upon them by standards of whiteness and feels an urge to take pride in and defend his Chinese culture. This instance is a pivotal point in "Fresh Off the Boat" where the generational gap between his immigrant parents and himself is met at an understanding.

Eddie Huang offers an insightful and witty narrative of being a second-generation Chinese-American. Under constant pressure to either assimilate or fully "act Chinese," Huang points out the constant balancing act that immigrant children are placed under, making the argument that what is his, is his, and not something that can be defined or assigned by anyone else. Being raised in a Chinese household but feeling backlash for embracing that heritage everywhere else, the discussion of what it really means to be a Chinese immigrant in America is discussed. The Asian identity of first-generation immigrants is valued as more authentic from the 'American' perspective than that of second-generation citizens and hence its integrity is being fought to be upheld more amongst the first-generation.

Works Cited

Huang, Eddie. *Fresh Off the Boat*. 2013.

“Bilingualism Persists, But English Still Dominates.” *Migration Policy Institute*, 2005.