Paper Type: Original Article

Hybrid Identity Construction of Second-Generation Chinese American Immigrants in Chinatown Family Through Third Space Theory

Liling Li[1]

1.Xi’ Dian University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China.

Abstract

This study employs Homi Bhabha’s Third Space theory to analyze the hybrid identity construction of second-generation Chinese American immigrants—Tom and Eva—in Lin Yutang’s Chinatown Family. It examines how they actively negotiate cultural belonging through mediation, translation, and integration rather than passively accepting binary oppositions between East and West. Tom utilizes technology and bidirectional learning to merge practical wisdom with modern rationality, while Eva acts as a cultural translator in public and familial spheres, reconciling traditional values with American norms. Their experiences demonstrate that the "Third Space" is a dynamic, generative site where immigrants creatively forge identities that honor their heritage while embracing modernity, ultimately challenging essentialist views and highlighting the fluidity of cross-cultural identity in globalization.

Keywords: Third Space, hybrid identity, cultural translation, Chinese American immigrants.

Homi Bhabha, in The Location of Culture, proposes that the "Third Space" is a hybrid space, which "is neither this nor that, but something else besides" (Bhabha 37). Bhabha uses terms such as "hybridity", "in-between", and "ambivalence" to describe the concept of the "Third Space". His purpose is to illustrate the hybridity and uncertainty inherent in the "Third Space" and highlight the possibilities it offers for multicultural communication. In Chinatown, the second-generation characters Tom and Eva act as mediators within their families, at work, and even when conflicts arise between Chinese and American cultures. Their efforts in mediating between diverse cultures constitute a process of deconstructing the binary opposition and reconstructing the "Third Space".

In the novel, as second-generation immigrants, Tom and Eva have not experienced the historical traumas of their parents’ generation; moreover, their formal education began in the United States. They embody the complex process through which the new generation of immigrant descendants constructs a fluid identity in a context far removed from historical traumas. Tom’s imagination of American material civilization and his acceptance of American language and culture transcend

the collective memory of the persecution suffered by early Chinese laborers, reflecting the new generation of immigrants' subjective reconstruction and selective acceptance of the target culture. Eva, by absorbing advanced American feminist consciousness and criticizing the gender norms in traditional Chinese culture, develops a feminist strategy of selective assimilation and plays the role of a mediator and communicator in both family spaces and public social spaces. The identity construction process of the two characters demonstrates the agentive characteristics in the formation of hybrid identities: individuals do not passively inherit established cultural narratives, but instead engage in creative integration amid the intersection of multiple cultural messages to construct a "cultural identity that possesses incomparable advantages of both sides" (Bhabha 37). Through the literary portrayal of Tom and Eva's identity negotiation process, the author deconstructs the binary oppositions between East and West, immigrants and natives, and tradition and modernity. This guides readers to rerecognize the fluid and constructive nature of cultural identity, thereby providing an important literary perspective for understanding the dynamic characteristics of cross-cultural identities in the context of globalization.

Using Technology for Selective Assimilation

Tom's special experience of separation in childhood fostered his open and inclusive cultural mindset. The transnational separation of his family allowed him to experience the diversity of cultural spaces from an early age. Growing up in Xinghui Village, Guangdong, he always harbored curiosity rather than fear towards the United States. When faced with legends about Americans mistreating Chinese laborers, he showed fearlessness; he even compared U.S. immigration officials to Chinese officials, thinking that "these immigration officials are probably not much different from Chinese officials". This way of thinking, which rationally compares heterogeneous cultures, laid an open and confident psychological foundation for his later cross-cultural learning.

In the process of Tom's identity construction, science and technology provide a unique path for cultural mediation. Unlike direct collisions of values, technology, as a relatively neutral carrier, enables him to selectively absorb the spirit of American modernity while avoiding the sharpness of cultural conflicts. As Bhabha emphasizes, "the different knowledges and styles of acting of two adjacent cultures... should be negotiated, rather than the weaker culture being subsumed into the stronger one" (Bhabha 162). This concept of "negotiation" perfectly aligns with Tom's practical model: he achieves equal cultural dialogue through the relatively depoliticized field of technology. The relative objectivity of technical knowledge creates a space free from the hierarchical relationships of traditional culture, where Tom can demonstrate his learning ability and innovative potential, avoiding falling into the one-way model of a dominant culture absorbing a subordinate one.

When Tom first arrived in the United States, he developed a strong fascination with electrical

symbols, which became a crucial starting point for his identity construction. In cross-cultural interactions, symbols are often more easily accepted than narratives—especially when traditional cultural narratives are complicated by historical traumas. Electricity transcends being a mere physical phenomenon; it becomes a key symbolic carrier for Tom to understand American civilization. He keenly perceives that "'electricity' is a word often heard, as if it is a symbol of all new and wonderful things in this world.(Lin 45)" This perception indicates that electricity has risen from a specific technical phenomenon to an abstract cultural symbol in his consciousness. His attention to "this small, flexible, and precise light switch" further shows his attempt to understand the broader civilizational system through specific technical objects. Compared with the heavy historical memory of the persecution of early Chinese laborers, electricity symbolizes pure technological progress and future possibilities, allowing the new generation of immigrants to bypass historical burdens.

Through his observations of the Queensboro Bridge, Tom completed a reimagining of American civilization. Modernity redefines humanity's experiential understanding of civilization through the mechanism of "time-space compression," which holds special significance for immigrant groups situated at the intersection of different civilizations (Harvey 240). Tom's description of the bridge is actually a process of reordering civilizational values: "This bridge is a product of human wisdom; no other civilization could have created such a magnificent structure. If it had been built a thousand years ago, it would have become the greatest wonder of the world today—greater than the pyramids, more extraordinary than the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and more majestic than the palaces of the Assyrian Empire." In this statement, Tom compares the modern bridge with iconic structures of ancient civilizations, achieving a fundamental shift in evaluation criteria. He begins to use technological innovation capabilities as a new measure of a civilization's height. This cognitive transformation embodies the characteristics of "traveling cultures," referring to the process of reinterpreting cultural meanings during cross-regional movement (Clifford 24).

Shifting from symbolic cognition to the practical dimension, the process of Tom inventing the dishwashing system demonstrates his active appropriation of American technological thinking. In a cross-cultural context, individuals reappropriate and transform the symbols and systems of the dominant culture through daily practical activities, and this kind of practical appropriation often becomes a key mechanism for the formation of hybrid identities. The process of Tom creating the dishwashing device reflects the combination of modern industrial design thinking and traditional practical wisdom. He "analyzed the problem, focusing on how to stack the dishes and how to dry them," and finally successfully created "a dish rack made of thick wire, which could hold plates, bowls, spoons, and chopsticks, and was also equipped with a two-foot-long water pipe." This invention adopts the basic thinking mode of modern industrial design—problem analysis, solution design, and repeated testing—while closely aligning with the specific needs of family life, embodying the traditional Chinese cultural wisdom of emphasizing practicality and

adapting to local conditions.

Tom's technical practice further evolves into a complex symbolic communication system, demonstrating a higher level of cultural integration ability. The signal light system he created combines American electrical innovation with Chinese-style practical wisdom in daily communication. The culturally constructive nature of symbolic systems endows them with a special role in the process of identity recognition (Barthes 109). The system designed by Tom—"three lights, one red, one green, and one blue; multiple lights can form seven types of signals"—adopts the basic principles of Western electrical engineering and combinatorial logic at the technical level, while its functional design is fully centered on family communication needs, covering specific scenarios from "calling Roy over" to "something very exciting." This design philosophy embodies the traditional Chinese cultural value orientation of emphasizing interpersonal relationships and family harmony. Tom's practice of enhancing family communication through technical means exactly reflects the liminal space characteristics described by Bhabha, "The Third Space is born at the limen... The stairwell connects the upper floor and the lower floor, enabling movement between them, 'preventing the identity of either end from being fixed to the original two poles'(78)."

Underpinning these technological innovations is Tom's diverse knowledge structure. His learning practice of "reading extensively, from electrical engineering and craftsmanship to Chinese history" embodies the core feature of cross-disciplinary knowledge exploration. This approach—rejecting the fragmentation of knowledge caused by specialized division of labor and adhering to open-ended exploration—reflects the "amateur spirit" of intellectuals (Said 82). Tom studies electrical technology, craftsmanship, and Chinese history simultaneously; these three seemingly unrelated knowledge fields form an organic whole in his practice: electrical technology represents the scientific rationality of modern Western culture, craftsmanship embodies a pragmatic approach to problem-solving, and Chinese history carries cultural traditions and the roots of identity. In other words, different types of knowledge and skills can mutually promote and reinforce one another. This knowledge structure enables Tom to conduct creative cultural integration in the Third Space.

Ultimately, Tom's technical practice embodies the generative characteristics of hybrid identities in the "Third Space." Due to its cross-cultural universality and practicality, technology serves as an ideal medium for cultural negotiation, opening up a path of identity construction for immigrant subjects that allows them to embrace modernity while maintaining cultural subjectivity. In this process, he neither completely abandons the practical wisdom of traditional culture nor blindly worships Western technological civilization; instead, he finds his own creative balance point within the tension between the two.

Two-Way Communication and Harmonious Coexistence

"Communication and dialogue are means for ethnic minorities to construct their own cultural spaces, and they also conform to the current status of multicultural coexistence today" (Lan 188). In Lin Yutang's writing, through active two-way cultural learning, Tom gradually grows into an outstanding cultural communicator. In his interactions with Ai Si, he achieves the harmonious coexistence of Chinese and Western cultures, and ultimately constructs a hybrid identity as a "global citizen".

Tom's enthusiasm for English learning reflected his positive attitude towards actively integrating into American society. When he first arrived in the U.S., he encountered the sign "Quick and Clean Try and Convince"（70）. Instead of being satisfied with a superficial understanding, he delved deeper and asked, "Why doesn't the sign say 'believe'?" Upon learning that "Convince is more elegant", he keenly perceived the meaning of social stratification behind word choice. More notably, he "paid special attention to pronunciations that differ most from Chinese sounds" and developed a particular fondness for the "gle" syllable: "I like the sound of this word. There's no 'gle' sound in Chinese characters. I like words with such sounds, like giggle, juggle, jumble, scramble"（89）. This sensitivity and appreciation for phonetic differences demonstrated his active embrace of American culture rather than passive adaptation to it.

Building on his language learning, he began to systematically study American history and culture, showing his determination to integrate deeply. Language learning was only the starting point; more importantly, he sought to understand the core of American culture. He earnestly studied American history, learned about American religious knowledge from his Italian sister-in-law, explained the content of the Declaration of Independence to his entire class, and learned to show respect to the American flag. This series of actions indicated that he adopted a serious learning attitude towards American culture, striving to truly understand and integrate into American society rather than remaining at the level of superficial imitation.

However, during the process of cultural transmission, he discovered his lack of knowledge about Chinese culture, which stimulated his internal motivation to reconnect with tradition. After meeting Ai Si, a Chinese girl, he began to take on the role of a disseminator of American culture: he used "Song of the Open Road" from Leaves of Grass to correct her English pronunciation and taught her American cultural knowledge. Yet, this one-way cultural transmission soon faced challenges. Ai Si's criticism of his "Americanized" behaviors—"You are too Americanized! Why do you have to get angry about things that can't be undone?" and "Why can't you calm down? You're always on the go, non-stop"—made him realize that superficial cultural adaptation might lead to the loss of inherent qualities(297). More crucially, when Ai Si mentioned Laozi, his reactions—"Who should I worship?" and "Who is Laozi?"—exposed his serious lack of knowledge about Chinese culture(290). This cognitive shock became the direct motivation for

him to proactively seek to learn traditional culture.

In the face of this challenge, he began to actively study Chinese philosophical thoughts, demonstrating the conscious construction of his cultural identity. After realizing his lack of Chinese knowledge, he joined the Chinese language class organized by Ai Si and actively studied the thoughts of Confucius and Laozi. Laozi's philosophy had a profound impact on him: "Laozi was like a dazzling ray of light. After Tom started reading his works, he often spent time re-evaluating himself. If you have read Laozi's works and truly understand him, you will definitely change". By learning from Ai Si the comparison between Laozi's "flexibility" and Confucius's "rigidity", he began to understand the Taoist wisdom of "understanding rigidity but dealing with it with flexibility"(235). Zhuangzi's concept of "Tao permeates all things" further helped him establish a holistic worldview. The acquisition of this philosophical cultivation marked his transition from simple cultural adaptation to in-depth reconstruction of cultural identity.

As his two-way learning deepened, he gradually demonstrated the unique role of a communicator in cultural exchanges, embodying the practical wisdom of "harmony without uniformity". With the simultaneous improvement of his Chinese and English abilities and cultural understanding, his relationship with Ai Si transformed from a simple teacher-student dynamic to that of true cultural exchange partners. When teaching Ai Si English, he used vivid and concrete metaphors: "You should say 'jabber' shortly and quickly. Don't say 'jabber' like this—jabber—jabber—as if you're holding a bowl full of water and afraid of spilling it"(300). This teaching method combined the rhythmic characteristics of the English language with the traditional Chinese wisdom of vivid expression. Moreover, the marriage proposal letter he wrote in Chinese fully demonstrated the harmonious integration of traditional cultural forms and modern emotional expression: "I am a child from a poor family, while your daughter comes from a scholarly family with profound learning. Her virtue and knowledge are above that of ordinary people... I boldly take up my pen to ask you to accept me as your son-in-law"(380).

The harmonious coexistence of Chinese and Western cultures enabled the successful construction of his "global citizen" identity. This successful construction was concentrated in the marriage proposal letter Tom wrote in Chinese to Ai Si's father. The letter followed the traditional Chinese etiquette format while incorporating modern expressions of equality, embodying the perfect combination of Taoist "flexibility" wisdom and American-style candor. The harmonious coexistence of Chinese and Western cultures was best reflected in Tom and Ai Si. They proved the possibility of the coexistence of the two cultures, demonstrated a practical path to maintain national uniqueness amid cultural coexistence, and embodied the concept of "harmony without uniformity" in traditional Chinese culture. This harmonious state allowed them to adapt to American culture while also becoming inheritors and disseminators of Chinese culture. In the end, they constructed a new "global citizen" identity in the heterogeneous culture overseas—an identity of a cultural subject capable of creatively integrating different cultural traditions.

Asserting Autonomy in Women's Commisson

As the only female among the second-generation Chinese Americans, Eva leverages her bicultural background to act as a "mediator" and "cultural translator" in both public spaces and her family. She assists the Chinatown Women's Committee in building a communication bridge between the Chinese American community and mainstream American society. Meanwhile, she also undertakes the key function of communicating between her family and the external society. Through negotiating and integrating the two cultures, Eva breaks the binary opposition between Chinese and American cultures and successfully constructs her own hybrid cultural identity.

First, Eva actively participates in the Women's Committee and, with her excellent English proficiency, "becomes a very useful member" (530) within the committee, demonstrating the agency of Chinese American immigrants in cultural exchange. The Women's War Relief Association was originally based in the Upper Town, and its influence extended to Chinatown. Miss Ai Si, who taught Chinese there, posted a poster "recruiting aspiring women". Upon learning this news, Eva was very excited; she finally convinced her mother to allow her to join, on the condition that she would arrange her time properly so as not to delay her studies. The Chinatown committee needed Chinese members with outstanding English skills to communicate with committee members from Manhattan and Brooklyn. With her excellent English, Eva "became a very useful member" (530) of the Women's Committee. Her work involved using her fluent English to "type letters, sort index cards, and calculate postage for packaging parcels". These specific language conversion tasks enabled her to help the Chinese community establish communication channels with the outside society and assist new immigrant groups in adapting to life in the United States.

Eva's ability to negotiate her cultural identity was further demonstrated in another activity. When "the Chinese were preparing to hold a grand parade", the Women's Committee's task was to "organize all Chinese women and girls", and "Ai Si and Eva were extremely busy whenever they had free time". Notably, their fundraising method featured distinctive cultural integration: "They had sent Christmas cards to cities across the United States, Canada, Cuba, Mexico, and various South American countries for sale, and the money raised was to rescue orphans affected by the war in China". This activity clearly shows how Eva moved flexibly between different cultural symbol systems. They used Christmas cards—a typical symbol of American commercial culture—as a fundraising tool, yet directed the fundraising goal toward orphans in distant China, reflecting their deep concern for their motherland. More importantly, the geographical scope of this fundraising activity spanned the entire Americas, demonstrating the transnational network established by the Chinese American immigrant community in the New World. It was neither a purely traditional Chinese charity model nor a fully Americanized public welfare form, but a unique practice formed through cultural integration.

By assisting the Chinatown Committee in integrating into other American committee organizations and using American cultural symbols to raise funds for Chinese orphans, Eva's language work and organizational efforts enabled her to gradually construct a hybrid cultural identity. As Bhabha once proposed: "In the process of cultural translation, an 'interstitial space'—an interstitial temporality—is opened up, which resists both a return to an originary 'essentialist' sense of self and the of an endlessly fragmented subject in a 'process'" (80). Here, Bhabha describes the complex state of the subject's identity in cultural contact. This "interstitial space" has three important characteristics: first, it rejects returning to a pure, essentialized cultural identity and acknowledges the fluidity and variability of cultural identity in contact; second, it also rejects the complete loss of self in cultural exchange, preventing the subject from being completely fragmented or disappearing in the endless process of cultural integration; most importantly, it opens up a creative space between these two extremes, where new identity possibilities can emerge. The core value of this interstitial space lies in its provision of an identity model that maintains cultural roots while adapting to new environments. Within this space, the subject can flexibly utilize resources from different cultures, adjust and reconstruct their identity according to the needs of specific contexts, while preserving their own subjectivity and agency. For immigrant groups, this interstitial space means that they can actively participate in the cultural construction of the new society while maintaining their original cultural identity, creating a new lifestyle and value system with cross-cultural characteristics.

Eva's work position and social role exactly embody all the characteristics of this "interstitiality". In terms of the use of language skills, she is proficient in English—the language tool of mainstream society—yet uses it to serve the specific needs of the Chinese community; this cross-cultural application of language reflects her creative integration of resources from the two cultures. From the perspective of social position, she operates within the language system and organizational structure of American society, yet always represents the voice and interests of the Chinatown Women's Committee; this representativeness makes her a crucial link between the two social groups. From the perspective of cultural practice, she employs American organizational forms and business models, yet always serves the collective interests and cultural inheritance of the Chinese nation; this service orientation ensures her cultural stance and value persistence in cross-cultural activities. This multi-dimensional interstitial identity distinguishes Eva from the traditional state of Chinese women, who lacked English communication skills and could hardly participate in mainstream social activities. It also sets her apart from those Chinese American groups who drifted further away from their original communities and cultural traditions in order to integrate completely into mainstream society. She is neither a passive recipient of culture nor a blind abandoner of culture, but an active cultural negotiator and innovator. It is precisely through the construction and application of this "interstitial" identity that Eva can move freely between the two worlds of the Chinese community and mainstream American society, fully utilizing the advantages of various cultural resources, and becoming an irreplaceable bridge and driving force in the process of the Chinese community's integration into American society.

Eva as a Cultural Translator in Family Life

Eva assumes the role of a cultural translator in family life, playing a crucial mediating role between the heterogeneous cultures of China and the United States. By reconciling cultural conflicts between tradition and modernity, and between Chinese and American norms, she builds an effective communication bridge for her family—who live in Chinatown—and the outside world. As Bhabha argues, "Cultural translation is not a simple transfer of meaning, but a cross-cultural dialogue involving factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and religion" (49). "Any translation between languages and cultures arises from two-way negotiation" (Yuan 114). Therefore, this means Eva must take into account the differences in racial perceptions and ethnic cultural contexts between Chinese and American groups. The reason Chinese American youth like Eva can survive in the United States is precisely that they go through a process of both disruptive compromise and positive reconciliation between Chinese and American cultures.

Leveraging her bicultural background, Eva plays a key cultural mediating role in communicating between her family and the outside world. Compared with first-generation immigrants, Eva has a deeper understanding of the institutional logic and behavioral norms of mainstream American society. She is well-versed in the traditional values within her family, while also familiar with American procedures and communication styles. Amid the cultural tension between tradition and modernity, and between East and West, Eva—by virtue of her bicultural identity—can keenly perceive and effectively reconcile cognitive differences across different cultural contexts. This two-way negotiation ability is particularly important for her parents, who are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture and accustomed to the communication patterns within the Chinatown community.

In the face of her parents' reluctance to engage with the outside world, Eva naturally takes on the important responsibility of handling the family's external communications, becoming a vital bridge between her family and American society. She demonstrates exceptional competence in dealing with various complex external matters: whether organizing information, solving problems, or coordinating arrangements, she manages everything in an orderly manner. The narrator notes that Eva is "recognized by the whole family as an expert in packaging." Thanks to her familiarity with American social systems and proficient cross-cultural communication skills, "if necessary, she would not hesitate to call places like the city library or post office to inquire about her questions." She negotiates effectively with various staff members to obtain the accurate information and services her family needs. This ability to move freely between the two cultural systems allows her to carve out an effective communication space in the gap between Chinese and American cultures, making her an indispensable cultural translator for her family in the process of cross-cultural adaptation and identity negotiation.

Furthermore, during the restaurant renovation planning, Eva further exerts her role as a cultural translator. By reconciling conflicts between traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern American concepts, she creates a communication space for her family that effectively connects family life with the outside world. In response to Mrs. Feng's traditional decoration idea of "hanging all kinds of pictures on the walls," Eva insists on the modern concept of "keeping the walls in their original color." She has a deep understanding of American consumer culture and aesthetic standards, and is committed to guiding her family to adapt to the external environment.

In this process, Eva engages in genuine two-way negotiation. Two-way negotiation means she must understand and respond to two distinct sets of cultural logics simultaneously: she must respect Mrs. Feng's decorative preferences rooted in traditional Chinese culture, while also meeting the aesthetic expectations of American society for modern catering businesses. The key lies in how Eva translates the minimalist modern style advocated by American society into a cost-benefit analysis that her family can understand. Instead of directly explaining the superiority of American aesthetics to her family, she cleverly uses the economic logic that "a modern arrangement will not cost more than decorating with outdated items," transforming the cultural requirements of the outside world into practical considerations familiar to the family. In this way, she achieves an effective shift in cultural concepts without harming family harmony.

The final renovated effect embodies a modern style featuring "direct lighting, bakelite tabletops, aluminum chair frames with red leather cushions," abandoning the traditional Chinese decorative elements preferred by Mrs. Feng. At the same time, details such as retaining the carpet reflect respect for the family's opinions, creating a commercial space that fully meets the standards of modern American catering. This reconciliation process fully demonstrates Eva's ability as a cultural translator: based on her understanding of both traditional Chinese aesthetic logic and modern American aesthetic standards, she finds an optimal solution that achieves consensus within the family and facilitates external communication.

Whether in her ease when handling external communications or her skillful reconciliation during restaurant renovation decisions, Eva's cultural translation practices embody the "ambivalence" in cultural exchange that Bhabha emphasizes. The two cultural systems can never engage in simple concept conversion during meaning-making, nor can they maintain their purity or exist as clearly separated entities. To achieve meaning-making, it is necessary to dissolve binary oppositions and establish a gap-filled, hybrid, and in-between communication space—i.e., the "Third Space." This is the compromise and reconciliation Eva, as a cultural translator, makes in the face of conflicts between heterogeneous cultures. As she mentions in a letter to her second brother: "Standing between these two perspectives, I can clearly see both sides." When confronting the binary opposition of two cultural concepts, she seeks a higher level of tolerance and reconciliation, and constructs the "Third Space" through proper communication methods.

Conclusion

This study, grounded in Homi Bhabha's Third Space theory, explores the hybrid identity construction of second-generation Chinese American immigrants—exemplified by Tom and Eva in Lin Yutang's Chinatown—revealing the active and creative ways ethnic minorities negotiate cultural belonging amid the tensions of heterogeneous cultures. Contrary to the notion of ethnic minorities being passively trapped in a "gap" between cultures, the analysis demonstrates that the "Third Space" is not a static marginal zone, but a dynamic, generative field where identity is actively forged through negotiation, translation, and integration.

For Tom, the path to hybridity unfolds through technical practice and bidirectional cultural learning. By treating technology as a neutral yet powerful mediator, he transcends the binary opposition between Chinese traditional practical wisdom and American modern technological rationality: his dishwashing system merges industrial design logic with context-specific utility, while his signal light system fuses Western electrical principles with Chinese values of family harmony. Complementing this technical mediation is his conscious pursuit of cross-cultural knowledge—from dissecting the social connotations of English vocabulary like "convince" to reclaiming Taoist "flexibility" and Confucian "rigidity" after realizing his deficit in Chinese philosophy. This dual engagement allows him to move beyond both the "victim narrative" of early Chinese laborers and blind assimilation to American culture, ultimately constructing a "global citizen" identity that honors his cultural roots while embracing modernity. As Bhabha notes, this identity "possesses incomparable advantages of both sides" (37), rejecting essentialism and fragmentation alike.

Eva, in turn, embodies the role of a "cultural translator" who bridges public and private spheres. In the public domain of the Chinatown Women's Committee, she leverages her English proficiency to connect the Chinese community with mainstream American institutions—typing letters, coordinating relief efforts, and using American cultural symbolso fundraise for Chinese war orphans, creating a transnational network that defies rigid cultural categorization. Within the family, her translation work becomes more nuanced: she mediates between her parents' reliance on Chinatown's insular communication patterns and American social systems (e.g., navigating libraries and post offices on their behalf), and reconciles traditional Chinese aesthetics with American commercial standards during the restaurant renovation. Crucially, her "translation" avoids imposing one culture over the other; instead, she reframes American minimalist design as a "cost-effective choice"—translating external cultural demands into terms her family understands, thus preserving harmony while facilitating adaptation. This practice aligns with the core of Bhabha's "interstitial space," which resists "returning to an originary essentialism" or "endless fragmentation" (Bhabha 80), but rather fosters a balance that honors both cultural contexts.

Collectively, Tom and Eva's experiences underscore a fundamental insight: for ethnic immigrants, authentic cultural belonging does not stem from choosing one culture over the other, nor from passively absorbing dominant norms. Instead, it emerges from the courage to engage in "two-way negotiation" (Yuan 114)—to recognize the value of one's traditional culture while actively learning from the host culture, and to creatively integrate these elements into a coherent identity. As Lan argues, "communication and dialogue are means for ethnic minorities to construct their own cultural spaces" (188), and this is precisely what Tom and Eva achieve: they do not merely "fit" into either Chinese or American culture, but rather carve out a unique Third Space where both cultures coexist, interact, and evolve.

In the broader context of globalization, this analysis offers a vital framework for understanding cross-cultural identity. It challenges the enduring myth of binary cultural opposition, such as East West, native/immigrant, tradition/modernity) and highlights the agency of ethnic minorities as active creators of culture, not just recipients. For second-generation immigrants and marginalized groups worldwide, the "Third Space"—as embodied by Tom and Eva—represents a promise: that belonging is not a fixed state, but a continuous process of negotiation, and that in this process, one can build an identity that is both rooted and global, both unique and connected to a larger multicultural tapestry.

References

[1] Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Revised ed., Verso, 2006.

[2] Bhabha ,K. 1994.The Location of Culture［M］． New York: Routledge.

[3] Barthes, Roland. Mythologies. Translated by Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang, 1972.

[4] Clifford, James. Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century. Harvard University Press, 1997.

[5] Harvey, David. The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change. Blackwell, 1989.

[6] Lan, Xiujuan. "A Study on Chinatown Narratives and the Construction of Chinese Immigrants' Identity from the Perspective of Spatial Criticism." Foreign Language and Literature Studies, vol. 35, no. 2, 2018, pp. 181–191.

[7] Said, Edward W. Representations of the Intellectual. Pantheon Books, 1994.

[8] Yuan, Quan. "Chinatown Narratives and Chinese Americans' Cultural Identity: A Study of Frank Chin, Fae Myenne Ng, and Chen Yaoguang." Master's thesis, Beijing Foreign Studies

University, 2015.