

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Research

Literary works aim to help readers gain more insight into the world and the social condition. One issue that can be found in literary works is immigrant experiences. An immigrant is a person who has come to a different country in order to live there permanently. Immigration is a global phenomenon that has occurred over the centuries. In immigration experiences, the people should adjust to the new environment and will face the acculturation process. According to Berry and Sam (1997), acculturation is the process in which immigrants develop relationships with the new culture while maintaining their original culture.

There are three key moments in immigration process according to William Q. Boelhower. In his article “The Immigrant Novel as Genre”, Boelhower explains the three moments which are expectation, contact, and resolution. There are many aspects that immigrants need to adjust for them to survive in the host country. The ‘resolution’ process is where acculturation may be accomplished by the immigrants. In the process, the immigrants live in between two cultures, learning and incorporating the values and practices of the dominant culture into their daily attitudes. Then, they will either assimilate fully to the dominant culture, integrating some values, or stick to their root culture.

Jean Kwok portrays this issue in her debut novel, *Girl in Translation*, which was published in 2010. She is one of the famous contemporary Chinese American

authors. Kwok is an award-winning, *New York Times* and international bestselling author. She has published three novels; *Girl in Translation* (2010), *Mambo in Chinatown* (2014), and *Searching for Sylvia Lee* (2019). Kwok's works mostly focus on immigrant experiences and on the author's website it is explained that her works have been published in twenty countries and taught in many universities, colleges, and high schools across the world.

Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation* is an immigrant novel about a young Chinese immigrant and her mother in the United States. The story speaks to many topics such as immigrant rights, workplace exploitation, and urban poverty; race, culture, and identity formation; and the challenges faced by immigrant youth in school, family, and peer relations. Thomas J. Ferraro (1993) points out that novelists and writers have captured much of the color and challenge in their immigrant lives through their writings. *Girl in Translation* itself was inspired by Kwok's personal experiences. On the author's website, it is stated that she was born in Hongkong and immigrated to Brooklyn, U.S., when she was five and later worked there with her family in a sweatshop. The novel is an interpretation of immigrants' struggle in defining their identity that relies on the author's personal experiences.

The writer chooses *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok because it is a contemporary novel that depicted immigrant issues that might also occur in the present. Among the immigrant issues reflected in the novel, the writer chooses to discuss Navigating Cultural Value Differences through Acculturation of a Young Chinese Immigrant on Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation*.

1.2 Identification of the Problems

Living in a new country, immigrants are very likely to face various challenges, whether social, economic, or cultural issues. In order to achieve their goals, they may have to give up the principles they have held in their home country. One of the common issues faced by immigrants is cultural differences. Immigrants have the choice to maintain their root culture without incorporating the dominant culture or integrating both the root culture and dominant culture, that depends on their condition. In Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation*, there are some issues regarding immigration experiences. The problem the writer wants to analyze is the protagonist's struggles to fit in the new environment as a Chinese immigrant. It is seen in the novel that immigrants need to adapt the dominant culture in the new country in a certain sense to fit in the environment, especially for the people who want to achieve a better life or higher socioeconomic status. Moreover, the young Chinese generation is expected to adjust their attitude based on the cultural mindset of *guai* (good). *Guai* is a concept that govern childhood in Chinese societies. In this research, the writer wants to show the acculturation process of the young Chinese immigrant protagonist to the language and values in the United States.

1.3 Review of Related Studies

To conduct a proper research, the writer does a review on some previous studies that are related to the present study, whether it has the same object but different in approach or the same approach with different object.

The first study is an undergraduate thesis by Rista Luhtfi Rahmadyatri (2019) entitled "The Acculturation Strategies on the Psychological Adjustment of the Main

Character in *Girl in Translation*”. This study examines immigrant acculturation in *Girl in Translation* based on John W. Berry’s Psychological Acculturation Theory. Rahmadyantri discusses acculturation strategies used by the protagonist and their psychological outcomes. This study focuses on the individual feeling of the protagonist. Through the discussion, she concludes that psychological adjustment helps immigrants to be well-living between their roots and new culture. Even though this thesis uses psychological approach that is different from the present study (sociological approach), it helps the writer in collecting Chinese and American norms or cultures seen during the acculturation process in *Girl in Translation*.

The second study is a thesis written by Amanda Amelia entitled “Chinese Americans’ Acculturation in Gish Jen’s *Typical American*”. In this research, Amelia discusses acculturation of Chinese immigrants that is reflected in Gish Jen's novel, *Typical American*. She finds that separation and assimilation are two dominant types of acculturation process presented by the characters in this novel. This study also reveals that in Gish Jen’s *Typical American*, acculturation is one of the ways to cope with the culture shock that immigrants faced as the first generation of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. and even though there are differences between Chinese and American cultures that affect one's belief, the immigrants are able to adapt to the new culture with some adjustments. This study provides similar immigrant experiences reflected in Jean Kwok’s *Girl in Translation*. The writer does the review of this study because it can help the writer to do the breakdown of the acculturation process for the present study.

The third study is the article “Mediating Cultural Speed Breakers: A Cultural

Reading of Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation*” (2020) by Rosily CL and Cheryl-Ann Gerardine Shivan. This article discusses how the Chinese mother-daughter immigrant in *Girl in Translation* mediating between Chinese cultural norms and the dominant culture of the United States in order to achieve both successful integration and higher economical status. CL and Shivan found that the mother, Mrs. Chang, for several years, always stick to the Chinese culture because of their constrained living conditions which delay her exposure to the American way of life. On the other hand, Kimberly who was exposed more to the American society in school and college gradually succeed to integrate between two cultures. A quicker acculturation with the dominant culture was delayed because of their lack of English skills and the instances of Chinese value that they applied in their relationship with others.

The next study is an article written by Shih-Wen Sue Chen and Sin Wen Lau entitled “Good Chinese Girls and the Model Minority: Race, Education, and Community in *Girl in Translation* and *Front Desk*” (2020). Chen and Lau analyze how Asian cultural logics, in this case, Chinese, are adapted to the American context in two young-adult immigrant novels *Girl in Translation* (2010) and *Front Desk* (2018). The focus on the article is the concept of *guai*. *Guai* is an important cultural logic that governs childhood in Chinese societies. Chen and Lau found that the new environment influences and reshapes the protagonists of *Girl in Translation* and *Front Desk* perception or understanding of what it means to be a “good Chinese girl”. This article helps to broaden the writer’s knowledge of Chinese norms and the stereotype of Chinese children in America.

The next study is “The Portrayal of Chinese Immigrant Cultural Identity in *Girl*

In Translation Novel” (2016) by Ajeng Nastiti Ayu Ambarsari. In this study, Ambarsari discusses the reflection of cultural identity in *Girl in Translation* through narration and dialogues by using descriptive analytical method. She points out immigrant’s struggles in the U.S. because of different culture to the new land. Ambarsari identifies Chinese culture that are reflected in the novel and American cultural values which are adapted by the protagonist, Kimberly, by using the theory of Dominant Culture. The writer comes to conclusion that the protagonist of *Girl in Translation* represents Chinese cultural identity despite the influence of dominant culture in her new environment, the United States. The writer chooses this study to gain more understanding on Chinese and American values because it specifically identifies each of them.

Another relevant study is an article by Paraskandola and Punjabi, discussing “Language, Otherness, and Acculturation among Chinese Immigrants in the Short Stories of Ha Jin” (2017) . These stories explore how Chinese immigrant characters navigate the challenges of acculturation in American society. In "An English Professor," the protagonist depicts the process of professional assimilation as he strives to succeed in academics, but still feels alienated by language barriers and cultural differences. In "A Pension Plan," the protagonist experiences alienation due to his lack of English skills, which limits his employment opportunities and makes him vulnerable to exploitation. However, by the end of the story, he begins to show a desire for integration by learning English. Meanwhile, "Temporary Love" shows selective acculturation through Lina and Fan Bin, who replace traditional Chinese family values with practical and personal ones. These stories illustrate various forms of acculturation, including adaptation, alienation, and cultural conflict. The characters struggle to

balance traditional Chinese values with American society, particularly in areas such as language, career, relationships, and identity. This study will help with the current study on how Chinese immigrants navigate two different cultural values in a new environment, and looking into emotional and structural tensions that happen in immigrants' lives,

1.4 Research Questions

To make a clear scope of the research, the writer limits the questions in this research as below:

1. What are the Chinese and American values shown in Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation*?
2. How does the young Chinese immigrant protagonist in *Girl in Translation* navigate cultural value differences through acculturation in the immigrant's experiences?

1.5 Scope of the Research

The novel *Girl in Translation* has some interesting immigrant issues in it. Therefore, in order to avoid too broad analysis, the writer decides to only discuss the issue of the protagonist's acculturation process. The writer will focus on analyzing the Chinese immigrant protagonist's acculturation in the United States. Regarding the theory, acculturation can be analyzed by using psychological and sociological approach. In this research, the writer decides to analyze the novel using sociological approach. The writer will not discuss anything out of the limitation above.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

An immigrant came to another country to achieve a proper living. The aim of this research is to gain an understanding of immigration experiences and to enrich the literary research on acculturation in literary work through a sociological approach. This research will break down the acculturation process of a Chinese immigrant in the novel *Girl in Translation*. The acculturation process is investigated to ascertain if adapting the host country's culture is essential for immigrants to make a better living. Therefore, the objectives of the study are:

1. To identify the Chinese and American values shown in Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation*
2. To reveal how the young Chinese immigrant protagonist, Jean Kwok, in *Girl in Translation* navigating the cultural differences through acculturation in the immigrant's experiences

