

BICULTURAL IDENTITY IN DAVID HWANG'S *FOB* AND *YELLOW FACE*

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ABSTRACT: *David Henry Hwang (1957-) is a Chinese American playwright who uses political satirical set up to portray racial identity. Hwang's parents are both Chinese-born; they immigrated to the United States before they met there and got married. In spite of the fact that Hwang – in a number of interviews – describes his Chinese American childhood as free of any racial issues, he is known in his works for his inquiry into identity and the concept of belonging. Hwang reveals his awareness of racial stereotypes in relation to the common perception of Asians and Asian Americans, and he admits experiencing racism when he first went to New York City. His plays usually centre on complex characters and depict their experiences with racism, imperialism, discrimination or generational differences, FOB (1980) and Yellow Face (2007) are outstanding examples. Asian characters that have been presented in theatre in Europe since the nineteenth century were played by white actors, like in The Queen of China Town (1899) by Joseph Jarrow and Madame Butterfly (1900) by David Belasco. As a result Asian American playwrights wrote a number of plays depicting discriminatory casting of characters, like David Hwang's Yellow Face, premiered in Los Angeles in May, 2007, and Lloyd Suh's Charles Francis Chan Jr.'s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery (2015).*

KEYWORDS: race, bicultural, immigrants, discrimination, stereotype

INTRODUCTION

David Hwang is one of the first Chinese American playwrights to bring Asian American issues of ethnic identity to Broadway theatre. He was born in California and his father is a son of Chinese peasants and he immigrated in the late 1940s to Oregon to study business at the college of Linfield and then transferred to Southern California University. On the other hand, Dorothy Hwang, David's mother, has a Chinese background and immigrated to the United States in 1952 to study concert piano at Southern California University where she met Henry Hwang to whom she later got married. Both were keen that their children would grow up with a conventional American childhood without being tied to their root Chinese culture. David Hwang stated that as a child he never experienced racism but he did not like the way Asian characters are portrayed in television and cinema. He regarded their depiction as nefarious, especially when it comes to screening Asian soldiers. The contradiction Hwang saw between these characters and real Asian Americans is probably what stimulated him to investigate the nature of identity in his plays in an attempt to find and present a true to life image to replace the stereotypical featuring.

Hwang's childhood is best described as being typically American and he was only related to the Chinese culture through what he heard from his family, not only his parents but also his grandparents. He once visited his grandmother in the Philippines to record her stories about his family, which he wrote down in ninety pages and distributed among his family members. Hwang's mother played and taught piano which is what introduced him to the stage as he used to accompany her during rehearsals. His father was an accountant who later became one of the founders of the Far East National Bank in 1974 - the first federally chartered Asian American bank in the United States with capital of 1.5 million - which gave him the opportunity to achieve great financial success. After contributing to political campaigns, Hwang's father, along with several others, got investigated by the city's attorney office for violating the city's financial policy. Despite the scandal, Henry Hwang was never found guilty of any wrong doing.

Some of David Hwang's experiences as Asian American are reflected in his plays that discuss national, ethnic, religious and societal identity. The concept of Chinese American identity, the different Chinese American generations, their belongingness and assimilation into the American culture concerned David Hwang who was also concerned with whether or not Chinese Americans should be detached from their native culture in order to perfectly blend in the environment in which they live. What it is like to be Chinese in America forms the core of his play *FOB*, an Obie Award-winning play (1980). The play discusses the issue of identity for "fresh off the boat" Chinese fresh immigrants and ABCs "American born Chinese" and explores the conflict between both groups. The prologue presents two conflicting generations: ABC (American born Chinese) and FOB (fresh off the boat) immigrants. Dale is an angry ABC who explains in the prologue – using a chalkboard – the qualities of the FOBs. Steve is FOB who arrived to America to study in Los Angeles and whose father runs a company in Hong Kong. Grace, who is Dale's cousin, has immigrated to the United States at the age of ten and has been living in California since then; in addition to her study, she works in her father's Chinese restaurant. She serves as a link between the ABC generation and the FOB immigrants.

Scene One, Act One, takes place in the back room of a Chinese restaurant in Torrance, California where Steve is seeking Chinese pancake (*bingo*). During his conversation with Grace, who works at the restaurant, he pretends to be Gwan Gung, the Chinese god, and asks Grace to treat him with respect. Grace invites him for a night out with her and her cousin, Dale. In their evening out, it is evident that Steve competes with Dale on winning Grace's attention. On the other hand, Steve pretends to be unable to speak English properly in order to mockingly meet Dale's stereotype expectations of the FOBs. Towards the end of Scene Two, a competition takes place between them on who bares more hot sauce on his food. Dale's prejudice as ABC against fresh immigrants is evident in his comment:

Dale: ... FOBs can eat anything, huh? They're specially trained. Helps maintain the characteristic greasy look.

(p. 26)

In Act Two, Grace suggests they play a group story. In their created group story, Steve chooses the role of Gwan Gung (mythic Chinese god of warriors, writers and prostitutes), Grace is Fa Mu Lan (mythic Chinese woman warrior) and Dale narrates the story. Through the events of the story in which a battle takes place between the two mythic figures, Hwang merges the story of Chinese immigrants who travel to America in pursuit of the American dream with a unique story from Chinese mythology. *FOB* ends in Dale's inability to understand or appreciate the experience of the Chinese and Chinese Americans, while Steve invites Grace to go dancing. Similar to the prologue of the play, Dale is alone on stage with his chalkboard, but unlike the beginning of the play, his characterization of FOBs is evidently inaccurate.

In *FOB*, Hwang cleverly presents not only different sketches of characters but also outlines the Chinese-Americans' ethnic challenges and difficulties in America. Through the group story, Hwang includes Eastern culture (Gwan Gung and Fa Mu Lan) in a western play in which Steve and Grace move between the mythical world of the two mythic figures and the real world reflected in the monologues of a Chinese immigrant (Steve), hereby, juxtaposing myth and facts and linking the past with the present, thus, creating reality, clearing any confusion concerning the characters' identity and enhancing the inseparability of tradition from the present world. Parts of the monologue are of a man who failed to enter America five times and, because of financial difficulties in his home village, he keeps trying. Other parts speak of the wrong notion, which is particularly common between Chinese immigrants, that America is the land of dreams.

Hwang raises the question of identity through presenting different generations and categories of Chinese and Chinese Americans. Throughout the play the rivalry and conflict between the ABCs, represented by Dale, and the FOBs, represented by Steve, are depicted. Grace, on the other hand, represents the bridge between the two groups, hope and assurance of their co-existence. Hwang emphasizes that evolution is the development of tradition, not a contradiction or annihilation. No struggle should exist between them since change is the continuation of tradition which results from the cultural awareness of the new Chinese American off-springs.

Hwang attempts to narrow the gap between different Chinese American generations on the basis that they all face the same challenge: mingling with the American culture and creating their own cultural identity. He sketches a metaphorical game play, in Act Two, so as to present the identity quest of Chinese American generations. The mythic figures that Steve and Grace choose to play in their game play account for their attitude. The general story – as described earlier by Steve in Scene One - is that of Gwan Gung's battle in which he “*pulled out his sword and began passing over the land, swiping at whatever got in his path. You see, Gwan Gung figured there was so much revenge and so much evil in those days that he could slay at random and still stand a good chance of fulfilling justice*” (p. 9). This symbolizes his intention to stand against and justly defeat those who humiliate FOBs in order to vanquish some of the challenges that face Chinese Americans.

Steve's background makes him the ideal figure to impersonate Gwan Gung and represent the FOBs. He is nothing like the stereotype FOBs that Dale mocks as “*clumsy, ugly, greasy FOB*.”

Loud, stupid, four-eyed FOB” (P. 47). He is the son of a rich business man who owns a successful company in Hong Kong, he speaks English fluently and goes to America to pursue his higher education. On the other hand, Grace who impersonates Fa Mu Lan takes Chinese American history courses while being a UCLA journalism student.

The battle depicted in the group story symbolizes the social battle between Chinese American generations in an attempt to maintain their own bicultural identity. The story narrated by Dale is of three bears who have cancer and the youngest decides to go for treatment where the setting is moved to mythic China in which the young bear faces Gwan Gung who was about to attack him with his sword when Fa Mu Lan protects the bear and shows Gwan Gung that his rage against the fresh generation causes nothing but pain. Dale, associated with American society, stands in the middle between Steve (FOB) and Grace who represents the Chinese Americans who reject the illogical intolerance and prejudice of both groups. As their game play develops, Hwang succeeds in reformulating the model of the three groups into a new type of Chinese Americans. Steve represents the new generation of FOBs who come to America to live, continue their studies or create their own business. They are no longer the greasy poor uneducated people who go to America to escape poverty and accept minimal wages simply to survive or raise a poor family. Thus, Hwang asserts that the current bicultural Chinese American community is of higher financial, social and educational standards. Steve’s anger against those who demean the FOBs, like Dale, is, therefore, justified, which is also the reason behind his choice – in the game play – to impersonate the warrior God Gwan Gung who symbolizes Chinese magnificence, glory and pride. His words reveal his anger: *“I FOUGHT WITH THE FIRST PIONEERS, THE FIRST WARRIORS THAT CHOSE TO FOLLOW THE WHITE GHOSTS TO THIS LAND! ... I WAS THEIR HERO, THEIR LEADER, THEIR FIRE! ... AND THIS LAND IS MINE! IT HAS NO RIGHT TO TREAT ME THIS WAY! ... I AM GWAN GUNG!”* (P. 44). Nevertheless, towards the end of their play, Steve expresses the FOBs need of understanding and tolerance instead of prejudice against them and rejection of their presence by their countrymen, among which they expected to be welcomed.

Grace: ... You are in a new land, Gwan Gung.

Steve: Not new – I have been here before, many times. This time, I said I will have it easy. I will come as no Chinaman before – on a plane, with money and rank.

Grace: And?

Steve: And – there is no change. I am still treated like this! This land... has no right ...

Steve: (*To Dale*): You! How can you -? I came over with your parents.

(p. 44)

Hwang succeeds, through the character of Steve, in depicting the FOBs, especially that his experience does not differ from that of the earlier generation of immigrants, and through the character of Dale, he cleverly portrays the ABCs. Grace, on the other hand, not only serves as a link between both groups, but also represents the ideal bicultural generation. She is the daughter of Chinese immigrants; she studies journalism and takes courses in Chinese American history. She

is also fully aware of her cultural heritage as evident from the group story she plays with Steve and Dale. Thus, she is the perfect balance between the FOBs and ABCs, especially that she believes that a person is his own home. Although, as a Taiwanese born girl, she suffered from discrimination against her by American born Chinese girls, she has succeeded in accepting herself and the community she lives in. She went to America at the age of ten and, throughout her life, she suffered in order to fit in in the American society. When she started school, she was placed in grade two instead of four due to her English language. At school she suffered discrimination by other Chinese girls due to being an FOB immigrant. Moreover, because of her yellow skin and her facial Asian features, she failed to fit in with the American girls in spite of the fact that she bleached her hair. However, she found her true identity when she quit attempting to meet the expectations of the white Americans and the ABCs. She succeeded in accepting herself and her place in the larger community, and was finally able to embrace and learn to live with the political and social notions of the FOBs and ABCs.

Dale represents the ABCs who are in denial of their roots and cultural heritage. He proudly declares that he embraces American culture and identity and refrains from his Chinese identity and heritage. He is not even eager to become part of the Chinese community. In spite of the fact that his father and Grace's mother are siblings who are born to a wealthy father, his father has a better standing because of his education, while Grace's mother menially works to earn her living. The fact that Dale, unlike Grace, is American born affects his values to the extent that he denies his Chinese identity. The way his values are twisted, his mock and criticism of Steve, his unenlightened hatred of the FOBs and his inability to identify with the Chinese people or culture is what Hwang criticizes in *FOB*. Dale's rejection of his Chinese roots and his total embrace of the west have left him alone because – due to his Asian features - he will never be fully accepted into the American white community. As a result he lives in isolation with no specific cultural identity: he renounced his Chinese heritage but he cannot change his facial features to become a white American citizen. Grace decides to help Steve and Dale to overcome their prejudice against one another in their pursuit of the American dream. She chooses to impersonate Fa Mu Lan, the Chinese woman warrior, in the group story, to stand against the hostility between ABCs and FOBs and prevent their mutual hatred from unsettling her world.

Hwang's depiction of the group story is, thus, crucial in enabling the characters to face their inner struggle that reflects their concerns and misconceptions. They all, eventually, learn that they are merely different factions within a larger group and what they need is to bridge the gap between them. Dale's loneliness at the play's end is highlighted. He is left alone with the blackboard that is a proof of his hatred and racism which was revealed in the prologue of *FOB*. His self-created isolation is the result of his renouncing of his Chinese identity and, thus, not totally accepted as part of the Chinese American community. Dale, at the end of the play, realizes that FOBs should not be classified as greasy, clumsy or stupid and, like all people, they have their own weaknesses and morals. This embodies Hwang's message in *FOB*: the bicultural Chinese American identity includes different types of people who only need to accept one another while at the same time be accepted by the American people in order to fit in. The struggle between all of them need to end

in order to survive; the winners are the FOBs and the ABCs who are able to find their identity in the American culture while embracing their ethnic roots and, at the same time, achieve a balance. As an Asian American voice, Hwang's focus on Asian and Asian American matters enabled him to achieve great success. In 1990 Hwang protested the casting of the Welsh actor Jonathan Pryce as a Eurasian character in the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon*, based on Puccini's 1904 opera *Madame Butterfly*, calling the casting of a non-Asian actor as an Asian character a shameless example of "yellowface". Thus, a major controversy was created, but, in spite of this, the musical opened on Broadway with Pryce playing the role of a Vietnamese Engineer, and the protest was argued to be discriminatory. Hwang's immediate response to *Miss Saigon* was his farce *Face Value* (1993) in which a white Caucasian actor plays the lead role of an Asian character. It was to be the second Broadway production of Hwang's work, but it turned out to be his biggest failure and closed in previews. Nevertheless, it provided an inspiration for his semi-autobiographical self-mocking play *Yellow Face* (2007), in which he describes his experience and his loud criticism of the casting choice in *Miss Saigon*. Many of the characters in the play are real people in theatre, media and politics. Hwang mocks his choice of the actor Marcus Dahlman to play the Eurasian role without realizing that Marcus is not Asian. The play also serves to highlight how Chinese Americans are sometimes unjustly charged with no or little evidence, reflecting racism in America with special reference to the Chinese American scandals that occurred in the late 1990s in which several people, including David's father, were accused of laundering money for China.

Hwang's real-life experiences are depicted in *Yellow Face* that is partially fancy and partially autobiographical and in which Hwang comments on the changing nature of Asian American identity and humourously criticizes himself. DHH (David Henry Hwang), the protagonist of *Yellow Face*, at the beginning of the play, gets an email from Marcus describing his visit to China. Hwang refers to his experience in writing *Face Value* and his choice of Marcus Dahlman for the Eurasian role unaware that he is fully white. Upon discovering the truth and fearing that he might appear hypocritical, DHH invents a story to the public that Marcus has Eurasian (Siberian-Jewish) ancestry. Although *Face Value* is a failure, Marcus's career blossoms as an Asian-American actor and continues to play the role of an Asian in real life. He even becomes an Asian rights activist. In the second part of the play, Hwang's father HYH, after establishing the Far East Bank in California, comes under investigation for the role of his bank in Chinese contribution in politics and his participation in American presidential elections. DHH regards this as part of a scheme of racial attacks against Chinese-Americans, and asks Marcus - who is also accused, as an Asian, of being one of the Chinese spies - to disclose his true identity:

DHH: Listen. You really want to help the community?

Marcus: Yes, but -

DHH: Then take off your mask. Not behind closed doors, or on some little cell phone call. No, do it in public. Where the bastards won't be able to make you go away. Can you imagine? How idiotic all their investigations will look? Once the American public learns that in their determination to find evil Chinese spies, this government spent millions of taxpayer dollars - just to end up going after . . . a regular American?

(p. 66)

As a result, all investigations fail. The play ends with Marcus living in China and accepted as part of the Chinese community, while DHH is alone on stage meditating on his true identity and his place in society.

Yellow Face investigates race, bicultural identity and incorporation in American society. Hwang tackles the theme of identity in relation to himself as the main character in a self-critical way as he cares more of his playwright face than causing a real change in society. Unlike his father HYH, he is selfish and cares about himself and his good name more than anything else. He even relies on his father to assign him among the board of the bank to aid him financially when *Face Value* fails. Hwang criticizes his claim of racism and mocks his ethnic arrogance which, ironically, drove him to, unintentionally, choose the Caucasian Marcus who does not look Asian instead of an Asian actor for the leading role of *Face Value*. He discusses ethnic identity and facial features with the casting crew:

STUART: But guys, does he-? Does he look Asian to you?

DHH: What do you mean, “look Asian”?

STUART: Well, he doesn’t seem to possess – any Asian features... at all.

DHH: And what exactly are “Asian features”?

STUART: He’s got dark hair, but-

DHH: Short, high cheekbones, slanty eyes?

STUART: David –

DHH: I gotta say, I find your question sort of offensive. Asian faces come in a variety of shapes and sizes – just like any other human being. Which we are, you know.

(pp. 21-22)

Moreover, DHH criticizes himself for not admitting his mistake and confronting the media upon realizing that Marcus is white but, instead, he invents a fictional Asian identity for him, creates the name Gee out of Marcus’s middle initial, drops his last name (Marcus G. Dahlman becomes Marcus Gee) and argues for his Asian ethnicity. DHH intentionally deceives the public in order to save his face; thus, doing exactly what he previously criticized others for while casting *Miss Saigon*. Marcus continues to play the role of Asian American, not only in different performances but in real life as well. The new ethnic identity given to him by DHH provides him with a chance to be part of a whole new culture and experience. Ironically, Marcus finds his true sense of identity when he successfully embraces and connects with Asian and Asian American culture. This is revealed when he is with a group of Asian college students, telling them: “Do you know how special this is? Out there – in the rest of America – everyone’s is on their own, fighting to stay afloat. But *you* – you’ve got each other. No, *we* ’ve got each other! (p.32). However, this community does not exist in the life of DHH. Act one ends with Marcus Gee performing the role of the King in *The King and I*, marking the birth and success of the fictional ethnic identity created by DHH. In Act Two racial identity is not presented in the same humorous way as in Act One. It depicts the 1990s press and government’s questioning of Chinese-American loyalty to the United States. The character NWOAOC (Name Withheld on Advice of Council) represents the questioning of the Chinese money that went through HYH’s bank. He embodies the theme of race baiting being

the reporter who raised questions about the allegiance of the Chinese American to the country and he goes on investigating some of the characters, like HYH, even after the government cleared their name, among which is Dr. Wen Ho Lee – a Taiwanese American nuclear weapons scientist – who was investigated and prosecuted by the Federal government for unlawful retention of national defense information. In 1994 the government claimed that Dr. Lee illegally downloaded data of American nuclear weapons to a computer accessible from the internet and that he helped the Chinese with software and computer codes. There were several allegations that Wen Ho Lee was targeted for investigations as a result of ethnic profiling. Most of the charges were dropped and he pleaded guilty on one minor charge. HYH, on the other hand, drew the attention of regulators in America – due to some bank transactions with Chinese banks – to what appeared to be illegal funding of American presidential campaign contributions for the Chinese intelligence. However, no charges were pressed and he has been cleared by the government.

NWOAOC visits DHH who realizes that the reporter is prejudiced against Chinese Americans and probably that is why he pursues investigations after the government does not press charges against HYH:

DHH: Why are you going after my father?

NWOAOC: I'm reporting – on the work of federal investigators.

DHH: Who cleared him of this stuff – years ago.

NWOAOC: Well, now, they're reopening the case. Mr. Hwang, your father is a Chinese banker.

DHH: Chinese American.

NWOAOC: Exactly.

DHH: There's a difference.

(p. 60-61)

DHH goes further and asks the reporter the reason behind his suspicions against Chinese Americans:

DHH: How about you? Do you see yourself as more American or more white?

NWOAOC: That's not the same thing.

DHH: No?

NWOAOC: Not in the least.

DHH: Why not?

NWOAOC: Because there's no conflict between being white and being American.

DHH: Did you really just say that? There's a conflict – between being Chinese and being American?

(p. 61)

Through *FOB* and *Yellow Face*, Hwang attempts to call attention to one of the important challenges that Chinese Americans face in America: they are never really considered true American citizens and their facial features are regarded as the evidence. Hwang also highlights the fact that sometimes the challenges are from within the Chinese American community itself. Thus, his characters – in search of their own faces – re-examine their own selves and their own prejudice beyond classifications and limits. Hwang's criticism of his own self, in particular, in *Yellow Face*, and of Chinese Americans, in general, in *FOB* and his argument of the absurdity of the different types of discrimination give more weight to his words. Through his sometimes humorous tone and

his socio-political commentary, Hwang attempts to challenge his readers to achieve a balance; he invites them to question their attitude, convictions and manner of living in an attempt to find their true cultural identity and reach a better interpretation of real-life events. The socio-political realities and the different issues that he tackles in his plays remain current. His commentary, which is sometimes engaged with observational humour, questions all sides of the argument in an attempt to achieve an impartial balance. His message is that every Chinese American need to be himself regarding the combination of two cultures. Being exposed to diverse beliefs and different views is a source of enlightenment, a means by which a person constructs his own identity, and an opportunity to consider different perspectives and embrace more than one culture in order to maintain a unique cultural identity.

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