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# Assimilation in the United States

## Semitism and Asian Americanism

*Megan Gibson*

Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* is a representational hodge-podge of cultural identities and minority experience, particularly through the lens of Chinese and Jewish Americans. This minority dichotomy presents an interesting comparison between the two groups, even to the point of realizing several similarities. Many scholars have noted these similarities while considering the minority landscape in Gish Jen's novel. Begoña González said on the two cultures: "What could be suggested is the strong likelihood that these two cultural and literary tropes function in a concurrent way" (González 226). It is this scholarly conversation that we will be entering, that is, the conversation on the similarities of Judaism and Chinese Americanism in Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* as well as their function in the American identity according to Gish Jen.

My purpose is to expand on scholars' interpretation of Gish Jen's depiction of similarities in assimilation and identity across Jewish and Chinese American cultures based on Jen's personal experience. From there, I will take a step further than the scholarly conversation has gone by analyzing how Mona's personal experience with Semitism enhances her coming of age story and enables her to finally identify among other Americans—contrary to what scholars have posited. At the end of the novel, Mona is not only an

American minority, but she is an American who finds her own unique place in society as part of a herd immigrant experience. Lastly, I will note that Gish Jen's Asian approach to the Asian American experience alongside American Semitism favors the intimate and the personal as opposed to the general, an idea that contrasts with similarly written white-authored Asian texts. By defining the two minorities in her novel, Gish Jen shows the humanizing coming of age narrative that occurs regardless of race: each person finds themselves amid challenges.

## Asian Americanism and American Semitism: Similarities

At a glance, Asian Americans and American Jewish people do not seem to share many cultural similarities, but several attributes tie the two together. In the novel, Mona's mother notices some of these similarities: "Ah, and is it true that Jewish mothers are just like Chinese mothers, they know how to make their children eat?" (Jen 119). The similarities between the two cultures become even more evident throughout the novel. Compared to Americans, Asians and Jewish people eat different food from what Americans eat, they have different rituals, and they have close-knit family relationships that produce different behavior from how white Americans would behave.

As far as how the two cultures affect Mona, her mantra throughout the novel goes as stated: "The more Jewish you become, the more Chinese you'll be" (Jen 190). To Mona, she feels a connection between these two cultures as they are both opposite of American cultural norms; the two act as anchors to hold her unique identity in place in a dominantly American world. David Brauner noticed this mantra and pointed out the stark parallel between the two minority cultures: "They occupy a central position in the symbolic imagination of both blacks and whites because, paradoxically, they fit into neither and both camps" (108). Strictly speaking, Chinese and Jewish Americans can't be defined as clearly as African Americans or white Americans, which seems to make defining the two from an American perspective difficult. They cannot be categorized into binary-colored parts. These similarities perhaps provide some reason for why Mona converted to

Judaism in the narrative: it wasn't as far a step from home as total American assimilation is. Both the ethnic and religious entities were ill-defined from an American-born's perspective, which is a similarity that Mona latched on to. Brauner continues: "Mona's conversion demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations of ethnic self-determination, both the potential for transcending conventional racial boundaries and the impossibility of ever doing so" (112). Mona is unable to break from her ethnic boundaries despite her efforts to do so; she is drawn to what she already knows. We see towards the end of the novel that she confuses the difference between ethnicity and religion. On Judaism, she says: "You can't give up on Judaism. You're Jewish" (Jen 211). For Mona, the two are the same. Just as she can't give up being Chinese because that is her ethnicity, she can't give up being Jewish because that is her religion. To her, their similarities blur their differences.

To Mona, it seems assimilation is directly tied to her Jewish and Chinese identity. Andrew Furman draws parallel conclusions on the similarities within the Jewish-Chinese-American phenomenon in relation to assimilation. He seconds Brauner's approach in saying that many of the novel's reviewers draw particular attention to the affinities between Chinese Americans and Jewish Americans as they emerge in the novel" (Furman 213). However, Furman notes the consequences it places on assimilation, that is, "Jewish [and Chinese] Americans struggle to determine which side of the hyphen they should embrace" (3). This sociological journey towards assimilation is one that many different groups of immigrants face, but in light of Mona's narrative, we see that she is othered among her Jewish friends for being Chinese and othered among her family for converting to Judaism. This is a consequence of her struggle to find her niche on either side of the hyphen. For example, when Mona announces to her mother that she has converted to Judaism, her mother is astounded. She says: "How can you be Jewish? Chinese people don't do such things" (Jen 45). Following this conversation, she confiscates Mona's menorah and her Hebrew dictionary as if to prove her point. Mona struggles to justify her religious decisions to her parents because she is not yet self-aware of her own individualistic self-identification. To her parents, she is simply Chinese—not American, and certainly not Jewish. While the two are similar from the American side of the hyphen, it is a different story from the Chinese side. To fully take on assimilation, Mona must first define what it is for herself as an individual, and not as a Jewish-Chinese-American in general. Since she has not yet discovered its

personal meaning, assimilation becomes difficult for Mona, who wants to position herself in all three categories. Without self-realization, the challenge of assimilation becomes threefold.

## Gish Jen's Contribution

It is difficult to separate Gish Jen from the narrative since she approached the writing of the novel through the lens of her own experiences, including time spent with Jewish friends in a hometown similar to Mona's. Scholars have noticed the subtle autobiographical aspects of Gish Jen's novel: "Not only does the protagonist view liminality as a way of being, but the text itself reflects this liminality in narrative elements suggestive of both fictional and true events" (Milne 42). If anyone knows and understands the similarities and challenges of both Jewish and Asian Americans, Gish Jen would.

As a woman who knew more Yiddish than Chinese, Gish Jen's life is a study on the trifold identity. On her own diverse American experience, Gish Jen commented: "I've tried to be someone who really thought about the American project, and what it means, what this nation is. I try to use my vantage point from the margins to kind of illuminate the larger questions" (Potier). We see from this quote that Gish Jen is interested in the implications of what it means to be American, particularly of a person's American identity. *Mona in the Promised Land* is her own study of the individualist identity, particularly with the three elements of Asianism, Americanism, and Semitism, of which she is most intimately aware.

There are a few areas of the book that give an extensive analysis of the Jewish contribution to American society. Though random at first, we can assume that Gish Jen considered the contribution, given her personal life and that her thoughts on the Jewish community are laid bare through the writing of this novel. In the novel, Mona ponders while in conversation with her friend, Barbara. Mona thinks: "She maintains there's something special about being Jewish she wouldn't want to give up. Look at all the great people who are—Einstein. Freud. . . . Barbara says being Jewish is also great because it's about fighting for freedom" (Jen 135). Taking this as a glimpse into Gish Jen's personal affiliation with the Jewish American community, we see that there is an opportunity to freely express oneself as a Jewish member. *Mona in the Promised Land* is Gish Jen's way of showing her respect for the

Jewish community and appreciation for how they fit in with the American mindset that considers freedom of individuality. Being Jewish isn't simply an experience of a cultural whole; it is also an individual experience of expressing one's beliefs, which Gish Jen saw for herself while associating with her various Jewish friends who came from different backgrounds.

On Gish Jen, Mike Harvkey wrote: "She has long been interested in, and has lectured and written about, hybridity" (Harvkey). As we have seen, *Mona in the Promised Land* is certainly a tale about hybridity, which is demonstrated in Mona's triple-timing identity. This is based on, as Leah Milne would put it, the idea that "[Gish Jen] simply sensed there were deep-seated differences in the perspectives and treatment of certain people based on origins and appearance, and that those disparities often occurred between her parents and the American world" (Milne 42). Gish Jen had seen the disparities made by native American citizens against her family and friends in the Jewish community. She recognized that there was a herd immigrant experience going on. From a young age, Gish Jen discerned the similarities between the two cultures and noted the American's blanket reaction to each minority population. Through her writing of *Mona in the Promised Land*, Gish Jen shows the individuality of the members of the community and how they cannot be categorized into a simple two or three-sided hyphen. Each member of the community is significant in their own way and makes their own contributions.

## Jewish is American: How the Minorities Shaped an American Identity

The narrative progresses as Mona struggles with identifying herself as a Jewish-Chinese-American. Her family members also struggle with her seeming betrayal of Chinese culture through her conversion to Judaism. Her mother tries to identify Mona through categorization, explaining to Mona that her identity shouldn't have three sides; rather, it should represent a simple duality. This means that Mona's mother, Helen, wanted her to be only a Chinese American. This is reflexive of Helen's cultural identity, in which the Chinese culture is drawn towards collectivism and community, while

Mona's tendency towards the American individualist tendencies was seen as concerning. Mona's rebuttal to her mother is integral to her self-realization: "'Jewish is American,' Mona says, 'American means being whatever you want, and I happened to pick being Jewish'" (Jen 49). This idea that Mona presents to her mother, while rebellious at first glance, is actually in line with the time that the novel was written.

In the 1960s, Americans were becoming more aware of culture and race. That awareness propelled Mona towards self-identification as she experimented with her own race. On this time period, Joanne Wallenstein stated: "It is 1968, the dawn of the age of ethnicity: African Americans are turning Chinese, Jews are turning black, and though some nice Chinese girls are turning Chinese, teenaged Mona Chang is turning Jewish, much to her parents' chagrin" (Wallenstein). This was the time period for Mona to find herself; it was the time for the race to become more fluid and less of a rigid bi or trifold system. The novel explores several variations of people from different races finding themselves through other cultures. Mona's sister, Callie, finds herself in the Chinese culture where her roots are. Her friend, Barbara, finds herself as she offers service to the black community and assimilates with their way of life. This was a time when cultures blended to create an atmosphere where the younger generation could self-identify within parameters that weren't as strict as they were in previous generations. This so-called "age of ethnicity," as Wallenstein coined it, was one where the younger generation, who was raised to create oppression, fought back and negated the racially oppressive forces of the older generation.

In addition to this greater open-mindedness among Americans, we also see that inhabiting several different cultures at once becomes less rigid and defined. Calling yourself Jewish and Chinese didn't have to be founded in anything—it was simply a choice the person made. We read more about this idea from Begoña González's essay "The (Re)Birth of Mona Changowitz." He says: "In the Jewish initiation rite, Mona, like any other neophyte learns that Judaism is about remembering you are Jewish" (González 230). Many earlier generations of the Jewish faith would argue against González's position. Certainly being Jewish meant more than just thinking about being Jewish; but, according to the rising generation, you can be who you want without any strings attached. The novel shows that Mona's ties to the Jewish community are mostly in her mind rather than requiring rituals or other practices. Besides Mona's frequent visits to the synagogue, there are no other

distinctions that show she is embracing Judaism, despite her persistence in calling herself a devout practicing Jew. In fact, few distinctions show she is actively involved in any of the three sides of her cultural identity. In her trifold identity, there is not more or less of either. She is simply all of them at once, and they are the makeup of who she is. This is Gish Jen's argument regarding Americanism posed in her novel. She considers Americanism to be the power to assimilate into a free country within one's own bounds and to not face societal pressures against it.

Mona's struggle of knowing who she was as an Asian American practicing Judaism and questioning how she could assimilate into society eventually became a catalyst for her to self-identify as an American who is Jewish with a Chinese heritage. This identification was entirely unique to Mona, which meant that she was fully assimilated into the American individualist society of her time.

## Significance of "Mona" in the Asian American Canon

Why does it matter that a fictional character finally comes of age in a novel? On the surface, Mona is simply a protagonist who realizes the intricate nature of her identity as one that she can embrace in her own individual way. Gish Jen's novel isn't autobiographical, though it does draw on some of her childhood experiences. This story is simply that—a story. However, we can see from the way Gish Jen approaches the two different cultures she experienced in her growing up years that her cultural background adds significance to the novel. It is a more holistic, genuine approach, given her background and experience. Gish Jen presents an opportunity for Americans of different backgrounds to approach their culture in any way they wish, and whether that approach is singular, binary, or trinary does not matter. Simply finding your identity among other Americans is what is most important. That is, after all, what Mona did as we find in the title *Mona in the Promised Land*. For Mona, America is a promised land because Mona is able to become who she wants to be despite her background and religion among people who respect individualism, even encourage it. On America and its atmosphere of personalized assimilation, Barbara (Mona's friend) states: "For once the

Promised Land has turned out more or less as promised” (Jen 135). The place that has promised equality, freedom, and opportunity has held to its promise, at least for the characters in the novel who decided to take advantage of this freedom in their own individualistic journeys of acclimation by coming at it through different angles.

Gish Jen’s experience as an Asian American proves to be invaluable to Mona’s narrative. Her coming-of-age story arc is one that shows appreciation and acceptance towards several races and religions simultaneously. This is greatly contrasted with other white authors who wrote about the Asian experience with their American mentality. We see this contrast especially in Dutch-born Meindert DeJong’s *The House of Sixty Fathers*, which is, in short, a story about American superiority in China. In his novel, progression and coming of age are surprisingly absent despite the young age of its protagonist. DeJong’s narrative portrays the main character, a young Chinese boy, as one who can hardly progress and remains childish and pathetic with only the white-saviorist Americans to help him as he struggles to find his parents. The age of the protagonist remains unknown as his level of maturity isn’t clearly defined. He cries often and doesn’t seem to understand simple concepts. Even his personal experience and contributions as an Asian aren’t acknowledged, though he is the main character of the novel. The white Americans are strongly favored as the heroes of the novel, which degrades the protagonist significantly.

Thus, we see the value in how Gish Jen’s experience adds to her approach of Mona’s coming of age story, which becomes part of the Asian American literary canon. The coming-of-age aspect from an Asian American protagonist and author is poignant and influential for cultural scholars studying the Asian American experience and their individual assimilation into American society. Not to mention, the inclusion of other cultures like Semitism and African Americanism makes it a much more inclusive and understanding novel than that of DeJong’s *The House of Sixty Fathers*. Gish Jen’s contribution provides an anti-racist viewpoint on how assimilation into United States’ culture works on an individual level. The focus is on how it affects one’s own identity, not on how white Americans in general would be affected.

# Conclusion

Now that we have seen the significance of Gish Jen's contribution to the Asian American canon, we can conclude with some of the essential takeaways that Gish Jen presents in a Semitic reading of *Mona in the Promised Land*, which compares both Jewish and Chinese Americans. The two cultures are different from the hegemonic American culture, but not quite so different from each other, especially when we see that Mona cannot fully distinguish between the two. These two cultures blend to make up her individual personality. Of course, this study of the two ethnicities working together can only be validated by Gish Jen's personal experience with the two seemingly different cultures. She combines the two in a novel that reflects her own background and experience as a second-generation Chinese American who experienced Semitism in her friend group during her childhood. In fact, her experience led her to analyze the American assimilation experience with new eyes, which she shared her findings in her novel. The protagonist, Mona, undergoes her own personal assimilation process that is unique to her parents' background and beliefs. Gish Jen shows her audience that assimilation in the United States—with all the negative and positive connotations that accompany it—is not identical to any similar members of a certain culture or background, but rather, it is an individual experience propelled by the people and experiences that that specific individual encounters while they are becoming their own version of their hyphenated ethnicity.

We have Gish Jen to thank for a renewed perspective on assimilation in the United States. This perspective she provides is not only that of Chinese Americans, but it is also found among Jewish Americans, African Americans, second-generation Chinese Americans who are assimilating back to their mother culture, and more. *Mona in the Promised Land* proves to be a study in American assimilation and its individualistic nature, which we must take into our understanding of the so-called herd immigrant experience to instead realize its uncategorizable nature. As readers of Gish Jen, we are driven to throw away hyphenations altogether and accept Americans for their drive to be their own person. America is, after all, the unique individual's Promised Land, where no culture is fully defined and no person is limited only to the culture they were born into.

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