

## Identity, Community Education and Private Schooling—On Gus

### Lee's *China Boy*



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**ABSTRACT:** Chinese American literature, as a unique part in American literature, since its appearance has undergone dramatic changes and received more and more attention at home and abroad, especially after the 1960s. The special writing style, the gender problem, the emasculated Chinese men and the struggles of oppressed Chinese are always the issues that catch the notice of critics. Among them, the exploration of identity is the most pervasive. From “yellow peril” to “model minority,” Chinese American identity has experienced a great transformation. To interpret this phenomenon, critics have adopted different perspectives, like historical, cultural, religious, psychological and sociological ones. However, few of them pay attention to the influence of education on Chinese American identity formation. Despite several researches about the role of education, most are focused on some limited samples acquired through the qualitative methods. *China Boy* as the debut of Gus Lee, since the publication has provoked a stir around the world, this research concentrates on the influence of education on the identity formation of Kai Ting, the protagonist, from a scraggy little boy to a strong one in the dilemma of traditional Chinese culture and dominant culture. Through the research of community education and private schooling, the thesis tends to probe into the impact of education on the construction of Chinese American identity.

**KEY WORDS:** China Boy; Identity Formation; Education; Chinese American

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Unlike his three Chinese-born sisters, Gus Lee is the merely one born in America. His father Tsung-Chi Lee is a rebellious, courageous and educational ex-KMT military officer. He remarried a white well-educated Pennsylvania woman Edith after the tragic death of his wife. His mother Da-tsein came from a traditional scholar family that cherished education and religion. Nourished in the complex family, Gus Lee therefore like his protagonist, encountered numerous complexities and frustrations in his growth. Since his debut *China Boy* published, it has aroused many readers and critics' great interest. *China Boy* set a brilliant achievement of the first printing of 7,5000 copies, and became San Francisco's first one city book selection. Comprised with thirty-one parts, *China Boy*, a semi-autobiographical novel presents a scraggy boy's turbulent journey in searching of the identity-construction. Until six, Kai Ting spends a carefree childhood with the concern of his kindly mother. Educated by Daili, the embodiment of traditional Chinese culture, Kai Ting learns almost nothing about the western culture. However, the abrupt death of his mother and the appearance of Edna, a woman who tries to erase every vestige of Chinese culture compel him to face the ruthless street. Torn between two worlds, Kai desperately needs to find a way out. With the help of Uncle Shim, his mother's intimate friend, Toussaint, a bosom in the community and Barraza, the devoted teacher and friend in Y.M.C.A., Kai gradually dares to face the bully of Big Willie and the violence of Edna. He begins to gain some knowledge about his individual identity.

### 2. THEORY OF IDENTITY FORMATION

“Knowing myself” has been haunted in people's, especially immigrants' minds for such a long time. But how many of them really

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understand “who I am” and can truly find out “who I should be.” As a popular term in today's sociology, psychology, politics, literature and many other aspects, “identity” stems from psychologist Erik Erickson's seminal work, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, in which he regards that the period of adolescence and early childhood is the primary time that individual and group identity establish. In other words, “Identity refers to the integrity and continuity of an individual's personality, the values and modes of life an individual identifies with” (Wang, *Being and Becoming* 2).

According to Dipboye, “identity is seen as that which ‘renders individual unique, which allows him to answer ‘with certainty the question, Who am I?’ ( qtd. in Tajfel 61). Stuart Hall in his *Who Needs Identity?* proposes that instead of being static, identities will continue to change under the influence and interaction of history, power and culture.

Based on earlier viewpoints about racial identity model and their own research, in *Counseling American Minorities*, Atkinson, Morten and Sue develop a five-stage Minority Identity Development (MID) model. The first stage is Conformity Stage. Minorities at this period, instead of appreciating their own ethnic group, tend to identify with the dominant culture. Their views towards themselves and other minority groups are strongly influenced by the mainstream culture. They are likely to devalue and contempt themselves as being physically different from dominant society. The second stage is Dissonance Stage. With a growing awareness of minority cultural strengths, they begin to hold negative perspective about Conformity Stage and start to show positive attitude towards their own ethnic culture. The third stage is Resistance and Immersion Stage. Contrary to the first stage, the minority individuals at this time completely adopt the ethnic values and decline the mainstream culture. “Why should I feel ashamed of who and what I am?” will be proposed frequently in this stage. The fourth stage is Introspection Stage. In this stage, minority individuals tend to hold feelings of discontent and dissatisfied with the previous period. The attitudes towards dominant culture are no longer wandering between two extremes. They at this time can treat the identity problems from the dialectic view. To them, at this moment, both of the two cultures have positive and negative aspects. Yet conflicts still exist during this stage. The last stage is Synergistic Stage. Minorities in Synergistic Stage experience a feeling of self-satisfaction with regard to their identity. They are able to accept or reject the cultural values of ethnic groups and mainstream culture objectively through their previous experience. It is possible for them to establish their identities as an individual, a member of an ethnic group and a part of the dominant culture (Atkinson et al. 40-44).

In the MID model, Atkinson, Morten and Sue probe into each stage through four aspects respectively: attitudes toward self, attitudes toward members of some minority, attitudes toward members of different minority, and attitudes toward members of dominant group. According to the analysis of the above four perspectives, Atkinson, Morten and Sue describe the gradual change of minority individuals' attitudes through their increasing awareness. From wandering between two extremes, either rejecting the dominant culture completely or declining the minority group totally to regard both of them objectively, ethnic groups gain a dramatic improvement step by step. Although the MID model describes five distinct stages, Atkinson et al. believe that there are no clear dividing lines between each stage. The five phases of identity formation is not absolutely distinct, instead, each stage may fuse with another one, and thus forming a flowing process.

As social psychologists, Tajfel and Turner pay more attention to the individual feeling affiliation towards the group in the process of identity formation. They, at the same time, show interest in researching the following consequences resulting from the identification with the social group. People see themselves no longer as the individual selves but the prototypical representatives of their social group. Instead of focusing on the ideal developmental stages of ethnic minority, Henri Tajfel keeps eyes on the negotiation of identity as group membership located in the big social context. In *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*, he defines social identity is individual holds that the belonging to the social group not only the physical body but other aspects as well, like some emotional and value importance to him of the the group membership . Tajfel refers the motivation for positive social identity which produces a drive for intergroup superiority as the sequence of social categorization, social comparison and psychological distinctiveness. Social categorization, as to Tajfel and Turner is cognitive tools that used to divide, categorize and maintain the social circumstance, which results in individual performance of conducting certain types of social action. By comparing directly with out-group, individuals in group try to acquire positive differences and distinctiveness (dissatisfied with the negative social identity, group members utilize diverse methods to positively connect themselves with other social group), which is called social comparison, according to Tajfel and Turner.

In order to maintain the positive identity, social group will adopt variety of methods to maintain or restore their social identity.

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Tajfel and Turner point out four types of strategies. Individual mobility: members will be motivated either to leave that group physically or psychologically to dissociate them from it and aspire to membership of higher status group. Social creativity: altering or redefining the negative identity. Choice of social comparison group: avoiding unfavorable comparison with advantaged group or choose to be compared with the group which has lower status. Social competition: group members may achieve positive social identity through direct competition with out-group (Tajfel and Turner 43-45).

As a dynamic and multidimensional process that evolves and changes in response to developmental and contextual factors over time, ethnic identity development according to Phinney is “an aspect of becoming adult” from adolescents (Phinney, “Ethnic Identity: Developmental and Contextual Perspectives” 1). It is difficult for most of the young people, especially ethnic minorities because of the complex world in which they live. Confronted with discrimination and prejudice, ethnic minorities have to figure out who they are and where they are from, that is to say, find a secure identity.

In order to better understand the formation of ethnic identity, Phinney proposes an ethnic minority development model, which comprises the following three stages. Unexamined ethnic identity: prior to adolescence, children have almost no idea or have negative opinion towards their ethnic identity. Ethnic identity search: after experiencing some setbacks, at the onset of adolescence, minorities begin to introspect about the ethnicity and start to learn and search for what it means to be an ethnic member. Ethnic identity achievement: adolescents in this stage have already got a secure, stable and comfortable identity and can hold a realistic assessment of one’s in-group in a larger social context.

Identity construction has long been the hot topic in discussing Chinese American literature. But it is rarely connected with education. Even if some critics notice this connection, most of them merely probe into it through quantitative method in some schools. Chinese Americans’ long history of being discriminated in education field and their continuous efforts in fighting for education opportunities are doomed to influence identity building. The following will concentrate on the effect of community education and private schooling on Kai Ting’s identity formation.

### 3. COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND PRIVATE SCHOOLING

Chinese since the ancient time have put pervasive efforts in education. It is generally true that “Asians tend to believe that more education will necessarily bring wealth, prestige, and social status to the entire family” (Park et al. 152). In examining the history of Chinese American educational history, it is apparent that Chinese Americans experienced a long and hard process from being excluded to be accepted, to some extent, from “yellow peril” to “model minority.”

Education as Lawrence A. Cremin defines is “the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities, as well as any learning that results from the effort, direct or indirect, intended or unintended” (qtd. in Yi 8 ). From Cremin, it is possible to conclude that education includes more than formal education in public school, but also varieties of informal agencies or institutions, such as families, churches, benevolent societies, youth groups...

This part discusses informal community education in the Panhandle, a black community. Panhandle, “was the butt end of the underbelly of the city, and was lucky to have plumbing,” whose inhabitants, especially the Panhandler boys “did not beg but to fight” (Lee, *China Boy* 3). Nourished in such chaotic atmosphere without care and protection from his birthmother, Kai Ting gradually adapts to the jungle law. Under the influence of the community violence, the impact of his best friend, and the education of Y.M.C.A., he assimilates into the street jungle in the end.

#### 3.1 Community Education: Struggling to Establish Individual Identity

According to Rosendale et al., children are influenced by the message from the community to some extent. Phinney notes that a positive attitude towards one’s own group can be derived from the context provided by a significant ethnic community. Due to his not growing up in Chinatown, the ethnic community used to protect and maintain traditional Chinese culture, Kai has some problems in sustaining his ethnic identity during his childhood. The black community where he lives during the childhood, to some degree, has a great influence on Kai’s identity formation.

##### 3.1.1 Community Violence: the Direct Cause of Identity Awareness

Kai appears in our sight with a defeated look at the first part of *China Boy*. Because of his Chinese face and his weak body, he

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always becomes the target of attack in the community once he appears on the street.

Locating in the social community, one will inevitably be impacted by the group memberships. People thus see themselves no longer as the individual selves but the prototypical representatives of their social group. According to Turner and Tajfel, in some circumstances, group membership greatly influences our conception of ourselves and others as well. This influence is not stable but flowing. A complete secure social identity is almost impossible to get. Individuals even those who occupy the superior position have to constantly maintain or search for a positive identity. Tajfel considers that in order to establish social identity, individuals have to take three steps. In the stage of social categorization, individuals have to define themselves as a member of a distinct group.

Though contrary to what Uncle Shim advocates, disobey the essence of traditional Chinese culture and education that his birth-mother taught and violate the humanistic standards of Chinese society, Kai has no other option but to use fist to build his identity in this turbulent and dirty black community. Fighting is a metaphor for him. As to Kai, the fighting on the community street is actually a struggle to figure out who he is, what he should do. The fighting is the indication of surviving as a member of group and even the sign of being a human being. As Gus Lee confesses in an interview, it is more difficult even to “become an accepted black male youth in the 1950s” because of his Chinese identity.

In the initial years after Daili's passing away, with unclear personal identity, Kai is like “a poor little Chinese hothouse plant.” American culture to him is still a mystery and “the evolving black structure of the Panhandle was an enigma.” So when Edna evicts him out the house, he becomes the target of the attack immediately for his special Chinese appearance. Some of the blacks in the community even don't think he is a human. In their eyes Kai is so ugly and they have no idea “where all the color had gone” (61). In social identity theory, Tajfel presents that inferior group members, in order to gain a positive identity, sometimes will choose to compare with out-group members that are of lower social status than themselves. In order to retrieve the destroyed self-esteem from the dominant culture, the black boys on the street with Big Willie as the leader, select Kai as the contrastive object. Being punched, hit, kicked and treaded from then on become the routines before Kai's final identity awareness. Under numerous attacks, Kai still can not figure out what he has done to make all these sufferings. Christian churches thus become his life-saving straw. Kai confesses to God that he is always trying hard like Han Tzu-ren the good student, who does not hurt living things. Though he prays to God sincerely to not let others beat him, he perceives no sign. “Nothing happened. God was busy with other people, probably firstborns” (94). Hereto, Kai begins to acknowledge that no one can help him, Edna can not, Janie can not and even God, this almighty saviour discards him. He has no option but to face the current situation all by himself. Self-awareness spurs Kai to try to change his self-image from the “flat, kibbled variety” (1) and the little China boy to a masculinized man.

### 3.1.2 Fighting for Identity Establishment

Environment, as we all know, has a great impact on one's development, which will further influence a person's identity construction. One person, child in particular, may tend to imitate what others undertake. Activities involving personal engagement or presence as to Bronfenbrenner are the environmental events that influence individual identity formation most instantly and strongly. Bronfenbrenner believes that engaging actively in what others doing or even exposing to the same environment will encourage the individual to imitate others and attend to the similar activities.

In this community filled with a cluster of angry boys with their fists up, Edna's abuse in the house reenacts again. This time, the abuse is reenacted by different fighters. Fighting, this special activity, as the final test of life on the street, is inevitable in this black community. Fighting not only measures a boy's courage but also “tested the texture of his guts, the promise of his nascent manhood, his worthiness to live and bear friends on poor streets” (90). Facing the bully from all street players, Kai gradually begins to gain knowledge about self. From the initial regarding himself as a girl to the final clenching fist to Big Willie, Kai's identity construction experiences a long and hard process. Running away while confronting black boys in the community is not the first choice for him any more. Kai selects and dares to face the obstacles step by step after he is beaten for so many times. He, at this time chooses to lift his fists no matter his opponent is strong or not. Although his body is still not strong enough, his courage is established day by day. Until the day he defeats Big Willie, a swashbuckling boy brought him the nightmare, Kai's misery life begins to change. After engaging in group, one gradually learns or forms the stereotypic rules of that classification. They are sure that some behaviors are the criteria of category membership. Certain appropriate, expected or desirable behaviors are used to define

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the category different from other ones according to Tajfel.

While being beaten for the first time, Kai cries and screams loudly, but he gradually finds that “screaming, crying, and making other disgusting, self-effacing noises were no bar to beating,” but makes them “add spice” (Lee, *China Boy* 63). He begins to learn to avoid the first punches even though he fails to dodge not all of them. Instead of crying and screaming instantly, he begins to run as fast as he can to protect himself. When he is “chased, blocked, and channeled into the fence or a wall,” Kai finally realizes that escape can not solve the problem. With the help of Toussaint and teachers from Y.M.C.A., Kai learns about the importance of fighting day by day. Gradually, he dares to face it directly. Toussaint encourages him to face bravely towards the bully and fights back with all his efforts. Teachers in Y.M.C.A. train him to become stronger, especially Tony Barraza. With the muscular body, Kai goes nearer to the winner.

“Behavior evolves as a function of the interplay being,” Kai Ting starts to use his fist like kids on the street step by step. The relationship between person and environment, expressed symbolically in Kurt Lewin’s classic equation:  $B=f(PE)$ <sup>[1]</sup> (Bronfenbrenner 16). To get rid of the “China Boy,” this insulting title, to change his miserable status caused by street fighters and even those who are little and more vulnerable than him, and to establish his identity as an individual, Kai has to run against what the traditional Chinese culture advocates. In his second book, *Honor and Duty*, Gus Lee further notes that by using skinny, weeping yet hard-knuckled fists, he begins to fight against the dirty and bloody words spoken by others.

### 3.2 Influence of the “Godmother”—Toussaint

It is known to all that peers play a critical role on the road of individuals’ development, especially during the adolescence. Burman and Bushmaster suggest that during adolescence, close friends begin to supersede family members even parents to become the main source of social support and are beneficial to the formation of adolescents’ self-realization and well-being. “Acceptance by peers is an important part of adolescent self-identity and has a strong influence on psychological adjustment” (qtd. in La Greca and Harrison 2). In this black community, it is Toussaint LaRue’s appearance that saves Kai from the lonely, miserable and hopeless condition. He is like “a blond fairy godmother in a pastel blue dress with a magic wand, giving me second chances from ages seven to fourteen” (Lee, *Honor and Duty* 65). He becomes “my guide to American boyhood.” Like the godmother, Toussaint is always there for Kai. He teaches Kai how to survive like a human being in the world filled with unfairness and he even explains life to him.

Toos is the infant name of Toussaint LaRue. Like Kai, Toos is a poor boy in this black community. His father died in the war when he was a little boy. But he still grows up happily with the gift of his mother’s love. Unlike other boys on the street, Toos sympathizes with this scraggy little Chinese boy. He never pounds, traps or cuts Kai down. Instead, he offers hands and opens his heart to Kai, teaches him sincerely and takes him to his home. Like Kai, Toos is a poor boy who grows up in a single parent family. Yet he grows up courageous enough with the gift of his mother’s love. In order to make up Kai’s cultural deficiency and help him adapt to the street life as soon as possible, Toos gives him an instruction in the following three respects: language, sports and fighting.

Language is central to individual’s sense of place in the world, because “identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse” (qtd. in Wang, *Being and Becoming* 4). Language is much more significant to minority individuals. “The first step toward self-actualization and identity requires a facility with language and the power to speak” (qtd. in Feng 71). The death of his birthmother is the end of Kai’s fluent communication with others. Unable to speak both Chinese and English, Kai loses the chance to stand up in the black community. So rectifying Kai’s broken pronunciation becomes one of the main tasks of Toussaint LaRue. “Long. Not light!” (Lee, *China Boy* 98). “No, no. China. Momma says, don’t say ‘dat’ or ‘Dem’ or ‘dee.’ Say it like this-see, move your lips: ‘that’, ‘them’” (Lee, *Honor and Duty* 65). Under his persistent efforts, Kai gradually understands what others talk about and can speak some black English. All these help him adapt to the black community as soon as possible.

Boys in Panhandle play ball by jumping, fighting and running. Unlike Chinese scholar, as a true American or as a true human being in this black slum, one has to know sports and be skilled in it. Specializing in playing sports is the precondition of good physical shape. “Lissen, China. When the ball come in, don’t hit it with your face. Use the hands. Catch it like this, cradle it, like it

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[1]  $B=f(PE)$ : Behavior is influenced by both person and environment.

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was a friend" (65). Under the patient instruction of Toos, Kai gradually increases his once frustrated confidence. It is Toos who helps to lead him towards the road to be an American boy with strong body.

As the final test of street life, learning to fight thus becomes the most significant thing for Kai in order to survive with dignity. "China. Don be crying no mo...Don run, now, Ain't cool" (Lee, *China Boy* 98). Toos teaches Kai to face the difficulties bravely, "putcher fists up. Make a fist! B of han's" (98). No one likes fighting, Toos tells Kai, yet kids have to fight in order to become a man. For "fighting was a measure of citizenship," no matter you like it or not. "It hard be levin, be a upstand-boy on dis here block, ya'll don fight. Don Havant win, Jes figbird" (106). Toos' persuasion and encouragement make Kai finally admit that to survive in this severe situation, mind highlighted by Uncle Shim alone is not enough or reliable. Only through fighting back can one secure his status and establish his identity.

Burman and Bushmaster think that during adolescence, friendships are "a primary source of social support" (qtd. in La Greca and Harrison 3). During the identity-building process, Toos not only instructs a direction for Kai Ting, but also makes him believe that he is not alone in the world. He introduces to Kai his closest buddies and his neighbors: Sappy Suds, Missus Hall and Mr. Carter. He also brings his mother, Mrs. LaRue to Kai. She later becomes Kai's black mother. "Mrs LaRue was Chinese! She just didn't look it" (Lee, *China Boy* 108).

Self-esteem as to Phinney is related to the positive attitude towards one's own group and other groups around. "A significant correlation between self-esteem and out-group attitudes has been found among (Latino)," besides, "positive feelings about one's own group has been consistently found to be related to self-esteem" (Phinney et al., "Intergroup Attitudes among Ethnic Minority Adolescents: A Casual Model" 958). According to Tajfel, the boosting of self-esteem is to find a more positive social identity. Toussaint LaRue helps Kai retrieve his long-lost esteem and has a great impact on Kai's attitudes towards outgroup as well his later ethnic identity formation. With the aid of Toos, Kai finds the courage to live on, feels the warmth coming from the black mum and the happiness as a poor boy and reestablishes the self-esteem even as a vulnerable one. Bushmaster and Sullivan point out that "close friendships are essential to the development of interpersonal intimacy, empathy, and perspective-taking skills" (qtd. in La Greca and Harrison 3). Friendship and peers around him gradually rebuild Kai's self-esteem, which do a favor in Kai's later identity construction.

### 3.3 Y.M.C.A.: the Cradle of Gradual Rising Status

Y.M.C.A., as an informal school is of great importance in Kai's identity development. At this school, Kai spends almost all his childhood and adolescents. Around ten years' study and exercise aid Kai to develop into a muscular and strong boy here. They also play a vital function in his later entering West Point. In Y.M.C.A., Kai meets Tony, an intimate teacher. A man who even becomes his another spiritual father during his hard time.

#### 3.3.1 Tony Barraza's Education: a Stronger Body and a Dramatic Change

It is known to all that apart from parents, teachers are the primary instructors and educators for children's identity construction. How they behave, how they teach, what they deliver and even what they think are all related to the growth of students closely. Under the instruction of Toos, Kai increasingly gains courage to face the chaotic community. But courage alone can not save Kai totally, a strong physical body is essential at this time.

After Kai is beaten bitterly by Anita Mae Williams, a tall and swift-limbed ten-year-old girl, T.K Ting eventually comes to the reality of Kai's life. Unlike traditional Chinese parents who choose to solve all problems for their children, T.K Ting decides to send Kai to learn boxing to stand on his own, and to become an independent individual. For relying on oneself independently is the doctrine of mainstream culture. Y.M.C.A. hereto comes into Kai's life, a place where he finds his putative godfather—Tony Barraza and other good teachers. Their target is to teach young men how to box to strengthen the body, and how to develop their character and their spirit. It is "a place of torture, a palace of pain, a formal school where street horrors were enacted under adult supervision" (Lee, *China Boy* 145). In the mind of Tajfel, the world we live in changes continuously. What happens in the social environment as to us is associated with the group activities which we engage in or even ones we do not attend to. Belonging to Y.M.C.A., this group, Kai wants to learn to use formal boxing to control the violence in the ghetto, and use disciplined violence to defeat the unrestricted one.

As a teacher, Barraza gives Kai his time, all his patience, all his efforts and all his experience. To this emaciated Chinese boy

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with so less care from T.K Ting, Tony is like a father through his days in Y.M.C.A.. He thinks that Kai is worthy of great effort like his own son. “Mr. Barraza was giving me gold” (177). He encourages Kai to have a try for he has the power and right as an individual. The lecture of Y.M.C.A. is carried through from the following two aspects: body and mind.

Boxing appears as a way of releasing anger aroused in a limited space within limited time. Boxing, this disciplined violence, whose features are “nationalist, assimilationist, and masculine, becoming a significant method for claiming an American identity” says Nguyen (qtd. in Song, “A Quest for American Dream” 20). Though, disliking boxing, young Kai has no other way in order to establish his American identity and survive as a human being. Lee once confessed in an interview about *China Boy*: “I was no more interested in boxing than dying by any other form of physical confrontation....The boxing gloves were bigger than my head and weighted more than body...; but I was sent there by my father and by a man in the neighborhood who felt that if I did not get boxing lessons I would get killed” (San Francisco Library, 2006).

Unlike Uncle Shim, Barraza contends that America, Panhandle in particular is not a place suitable for thinkers. All he does is just to save the little boy out by using what he learned before. To survive in this violent society, weedy body is a fatal blow. With his patience, Barraza tells Kai how to stand up correctly, how to attack the opponents adeptly and how to rely on himself through boxing. “Win for you means to get through it and hurt your opponent. And that is the truth, son, even if you leak all your blood right here on this street and you can’t see for your eyeballs being in the blood. There are no bells and no three-minute clock. You have no corner” (Lee, *China Boy* 292-93).

Under this kind of education, Kai becomes stronger day by day and his life improves step by step. While someone calls him “China Boy” again, he no longer lowers his head, but stops to cast his fist. After being slapped by Edna, he no longer cries and covers his face, but feels angry. Kai is beginning to have a place in the world.

### 3.3.2 Finding a Home for the Mind and Spirit

The second point is to strengthen the mind. “Why am I here?” is the first problem should be solved just as individuals have to figure out who they are. Barraza tells Kai that the only purpose of his coming here is to establish his identity, to make a man of himself for the reason that Americans rely on themselves. Mr. Barraza is constantly inputting courage and self-awareness into Kai’s mind, such as, “Bur gonna be Sunna God’s children, and not a bruise bag, an ouch paunch, fer them dumb un-Christian bullies” (232). The key point to be an American is to gain knowledge about what Americans strive for. Like a father, Tony gives Kai his meal, takes him to his home, which helps to find a warm place in Kai’s cold heart. Besides Tony, there are some other teachers, like Mr. Punsalong and Mr. Lewis. They educate Kai that there are still other things he needs to learn besides gathering the courage and gaining self-awareness. Mr. Punsalong teaches Kai the importance of defense and resolution. When the punch comes, hitting back is necessary no matter he is crying or pissing his pants. Resolution, the one that determines to defeat the rival is all he needs. Mr. Lewis tells him the significance of thinking, “thinking, lets you win, in *everything*” (194).

Boxing in Mr. Lewis’ eyes is science. It not only depends on the physical body, but also the brains. Fists are definitely important in boxing, so is thinking. While meeting Lucky Jerome, another poor but unfriendly black boy for the second time, fear still fills in Kai’s mind, but this time he tells himself not to run but to use his brain to solve the current problem. Even though without ring, boxing space and coaches, Kai finds his own pace with the thinking. “I start again with Combo Four, 1-1-3-2,” “Sou go wan bah dan!” (271). He keeps thrusting his fists into Lucky’s face until the blood appears. With the combination of fist and thinking, Kai even makes Jerome cry. Being exercised in Y.M.C.A., Kai gradually picks up his long lost confidence and self-esteem. “I felt like a historic rebel, a Chinese kid with the mouth of renegade warlord, ready to tear the roof from Heaven itself” (271). The triumph of Kai contributes to building his confidence. He begins to think that anything is possible. In reality, the biggest enemy waiting for him is not Jerome, but Big Willie—the neighborhood bully and Edna—the embodiment of whiteness.

Big Willie, as Toos puts it “he don’t take’em ta wear. He take’em to take’em” (106). What he wants is just to build a law for himself. He has become “the juggernaut of my life, exemplifying the uselessness of effort” (282). Big Willie is like a stone that blocks his way towards assimilating into this black group. Instructed by his three guiding fathers, Mr. Barraza, Mr. Punsalong and Mr. Lewis, Kai finally makes his decision to gain back his self-esteem and build his identity in this black community. “All you have to do is hurt him, to give, not receive. Spend it all, leave nothing” (309). With all his efforts, Kai feels his body is “a hormonal atomic bomb, splintered in pain, propelled by adrenaline, crazed between mortal fear, uncontrollable rage, and mindless fury” (313). As

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the delegate of oppressed minorities, Kai succeeds in beating this bully away from him. He hereto overturns his inferior status under the education of those coaches in Y.M.C.A.. Kai cries loudly at the bottom of his heart, “Oh, Coach-Fathers. Thank you, Fathers” (319).

Edna is another big problem besides Big Willie. Her principle and punishment have irritated this Chinese boy for a long time. It is time for him to retrieve his lost dignity and his lost voice. “I done poun’ Big Willie,” he says with great clarity, “I want go inside...I want drink” (322). “I” as the symbolization of right, and high social status claims Kai’s recapturing his identity. “You not my Aah-ee! I ain’t fo’ yo’ pic kin-on, no mo’!” (322). These two sentences with the combination of verbal and physical violence expressed through Chinese and Black English appear as a new and unique Chinese American identity. In *Honor and Duty*, Lee tells us that Edna is frightened by this scene. She cries and makes peace with him from then on. Kai since then totally adapts to the black community with the dual identity of Chinese and black American boy. Kai’s final confrontation with Edna by using the mix of black English, the black toughness, uncompromising attitude, and his boxing style is like a final claim for his lost everything, including his birthmother.

It is these strong black teachers in Y.M.C.A. and Toussaint LaRue, his first best friend who save Kai completely from the chaotic and dangerous community. As James Baldwin puts it, “In the United States, violence and heroism have been made synonymous except when it comes to blacks” (qtd. in Nguyen 10). Fighting or violence in Gus Lee’s eyes is not the atrocity that disturbs the social security but the essential means applied to establish inferior group’s identity. The disciplined boxing gives Kai a strong body. Those fathers offer him a clear mind, and Toos helps establish his courage. Kai finally not only survives in this chaotic black community, but also claims his identity from Big Willie and Edna. During this period, Kai gradually internalizes the American doctrine: no one can help you but you yourself. Thinking as to Uncle Shim, this Chinese scholar, is the key point in dealing with problems. Trying one’s every effort to fight against the bully is what those American teachers teach him. Kai gradually realizes that in this foreign land, thinking proposed by Uncle Shim can not save him, only the struggling doctrine highlighted by the mainstream culture can rescue him from the troublesome. Under the influence of the American black adults and peers, Kai goes towards the American identity closer step by step, though he still remembers his mother’s and Uncle’s Chinese doctrine. After he attends West Point, Kai describes that his childhood campaign makes him become a successful Negro youth. By means of defeating Big Willie, Kai finally establishes his unique Chinese American identity. In the third stage put forward by Atkinson, Morten and Sue, the individuals completely endorse the minority view and discard the doctrine advocated by the dominant culture. However, Kai transcends the Resistance and Immersion Stage, and steps into West Point to search for his American identity.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Chinese American identity is by no means simple, whose developmental process is as well complex. Only after suffering from setbacks in mainstream culture can Chinese Americans truly recognize the importance of identity. From the childhood to the adolescence and then to the adulthood, Chinese American identity construction experiences a long and dynamic process. Through the analysis of Kai Ting’s identity formation under the impact of education, it is not difficult to see the significance of education to the construction of Chinese American identity. Instructions and influence from different delegates of either traditional Chinese culture and mainstream American culture will help lead to the final achievement of identity construction, but may as well make individuals feel confused before their eventual integration.

The setbacks and bully suffered on the street make Kai gradually understand the importance of building identity. With the support of Toussaint LaRue and teachers from Y.M.C.A., Kai stands up and establishes his individual identity step by step. With the expectation of his failed father, Kai at the age of 17, steps on the road of setting up his American identity. The discrimination from white peers then leads Kai to realize that he can never become a true American because of his different complexion. Under the education of two teachers in the college and instructions from the embodiment of the past—Uncle Shim, Kai comes to the recognition of the significance of preserving the root and maintaining the ethnic identity. The final dropout from West Point makes Kai confess his long term confusion and split because of too many wants from others around. He, at this time, decides to take a new road that has been adopted by his father and Uncle Shim. Since neither the assimilation to the dominant society nor the adherence to the traditional Chinese culture can aid him through the hard time in this foreign land, Kai makes his determination to take the integration road.

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