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The Identity Reconstruction of James in Everything I Never Told You

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**ABSTRACT**

*“Everything I Never Told You” is a grievous observation of identity crisis that the Lees, an interracial family, are subjected to. Being an essential part of human’s life, identity is often used by people to find their places and constitute relationships among members of the society. People are inherently uncertain about their own identities because it is not only a self-conception existing in each individual, but also a reflected image in the eyes of “others”. James Lee rejects some defining parts of himself and makes every effort to construct a self-deceptive identity as he struggles to fit into the mainstream of the United States, but only to obscure the boundary between “self” and “others” and be plagued by his identity crisis. Awareness of the threat to personal identity is not confined to the Lees, but manifests itself at all levels of the population. The study makes serious observation to the mental crisis and social predicament other Chinese Americans like James are facing and further explores the underlying causes of their identity crisis and anxiety. In the binary or mixed cultures, since people can’t always gain recognition from the target society by changing roles or by subjective self-categorization, the change of personal identity ultimately depends on the increased status of the group as a whole.*

**KEYWORDS: Identity Anxiety, Identity Recognition, Cognitive Context, Abjection**

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**Introduction**

The book titled "Everything I Never Told You" is an applauded novel by Celeste Ng. It is a grievous observation about the deep-seated racial stereotype, the stress of familial expectations, and the great thirst for belonging. Ng successfully illustrates the mental crisis and social predicament Chinese Americans are facing, casting a powerful light on their tremendous racial and social pressures. The novel tells a story set in the 1970s, a time when the term "oriental" was tossed about freely and interracial marriages were both rare and stigmatized. The Lees in the story was an outwardly successful interracial family. James, the father with Chinese origins, was academically talented and worked as a college professor in a small town of Ohio. Marilyn, his wife, was a former Harvard student who had put her ambitions on hold to raise their three children. Nath, the eldest son, just got admission to Harvard. Their middle child Lydia was believed to be doing well in high school and their youngest daughter Hanah was caring and obedient. It seemed that the Lees had been successful in parenting, in social status and in their

integration into the mainstream American society. However, as the story goes on, James and Marilyn, were horrified to realize the reason of Lydia's death and the truth of their dysfunctional family. The seemingly happy and successful family was virtually marginalized and isolated from the major American society. This overwhelming racial and social pressure that the Lees were constantly subjected to led to their multiple crises. By unveiling the "success" of the Lees, the novel made a serious observation to the identity crisis of minor Americans (Chinese Americans in particular) and the reasons behind their anxieties.

### **The Illusion of Integration: James's**

#### **Identity Anxiety and Identity Crisis**

It is essential for a person to have some kind of evaluative conception of himself, of his most important characteristics, and his value, importance or social significance. This conception, fostered by a unique culture, is an individual's link with particular values and thus a necessary part of a person's identity. In the view of sociologists, identity mainly includes social identity and self-identity. Social identity refers to a person's conformity or closeness to the normative rules, values, and beliefs in a particular culture. Self-identity is a kind of inner identity, which is a psychosocial connotation based on a common readiness to live in opposition, and on a common freedom from prejudices and a maintenance of an inner solidarity, (Wang Chengbing, 2004).

The inner-identity has nothing to do with races, genders, classes and religions. Yet as Hegel once suggested, "a fully developed self will not be content with subjective satisfaction, but will require recognition of his status from others." [Li Hongyan, 2011] As the British writer Alain De Botton said: "The reason why others' approval and appreciation to us count so much is that human beings are inherently uncertain about their own value. The evaluation of ourselves depends to a large extent on what others think of us. Our self-perception and self-identity are completely influenced by the people around us." [Alain De Botton, 2007] It can also be said that the quality of a person's self-conception is influenced by the conceptions that others have of him (especially some kind of positive appreciation or affirmation of him). Since identity is not only a self-conception existing in each individual, but also a reflected image in the eyes of "others", people cannot determine their own identity, but depend on the social evaluative system and other people's perceptions. The subject is therefore prone to feel anxious and suffers from a sense of uncertainty and helplessness. As the second generation of American immigrants, James was born and grew up as the only Asian student in the Midwestern boarding school where his father was the janitor. Like many other American minorities, James didn't have the continuity of his cultural identity. He showed the identity discontinuity when he struggled to integrate into the United States. At the same time, he also had the stability and inheritance in his ethnic identity. James had been plagued by the identity crisis, confused and anxious about his ethnic cultural identity, and always lived in self-contempt and self-denial. Before college, he did not attend the dances, or the pep rallies, or the junior or senior proms. His image on the yearbook upon graduation appeared as someone being caught trespassing. At college, nothing had changed. He still had few acquaintances and no friends. He still found himself "shifting in his seat, as if at any moment someone might notice him and ask him to leave. He had never quite felt he belonged here." [Celeste Ng, 2015] The lack of identity made James deeply anxious about his ethnic cultural identity, and he spent his life yearning to be recognized and accepted by the mainstream American society.

In order to mix in, he even chose to break away from his family and tried to reconstruct a new self-identity in the mainstream white society. The strong desire of being accepted by the mainstream society made him accept and internalize all the values, norms, institutions of the white society, and disapprove of any symbols with traces of national culture. When James was young, he made a plan of studying American culture---listening to the radio, reading comics, saving his pocket money for movies, learning the rules of board game in case of unexpected invitations. When other students did family tree projects in class, he pretended to forget the assignment even though he would get a zero for it. In the fifth grade, afraid of having an accent, he stopped speaking Chinese to his parents; and long before that, he had stopped speaking to his parents at school at all. Even more, he'd been embarrassed to ask classmates to his house, afraid that they'd recognize his mother from the lunch line, or his father from mopping the hallway. However, although James took the initiative to abandon his family roots and accepted the white culture, he was always a marginal figure in the mainstream society. The glass ceiling of racism always made him suffer in great depression.

To James, years of unabashed stares prickled his spine, and mutters of chink and gook stung his ears, as if he were an animal in the zoo. He realized he was so incongruous in their eyes that every time he saw himself from the outside, the way other people saw him, he remembered all over again that he was different. Being different had always been a brand on his forehead. He was always haunted by this sense of misfit and did not feel at ease anywhere, which led to his identity crisis and ultimate isolation from the society. Just as what Nath had observed, "His parents never go out or entertain; they have no dinner parties, no bridge group, no hunting buddies or luncheon pals. They have no real friends and were a family of misfits." [Celeste Ng, 2015] For James, the dominating white culture is the root of his identity crisis and identity anxiety. Like many Chinese descendants, James also tried to change his role so as to gain more recognition and achieve social mobility. Young James, six years old at the time, having read every newspaper, all the books his father had bought, a nickel a bag at library book sales, successfully gained the admission as the first oriental student in Lloyd and made all his way to Harvard. Being the most accomplished in his class, James was certain that he would be hired at Harvard, but having a lower social class background can be experienced as stigmatizing at work. [Anna M, 2018] James was unfortunately declined because of ethnic reasons. Failing to secure the faculty position at Harvard, he had to accept an offer from the humble Middlewood College in a small town of Ohio, but his students treated him like an exotic interloper, and so did people from work and his neighbors. It was almost impossible for him to have social mobility in the white-dominating society.

Intermarriage is another way for Chinese descendants to approach the whites so as to improve their racial status. Many Chinese Americans tried to eliminate their psychological anxiety through genetic remodeling. James met Marilyn in 1957 when he was a doctoral candidate at Harvard, teaching a class on American culture in which she was a student. When she met him and recognized the racist treatment he had been enduring, Marilyn felt a kinship with him and the two began an affair. When Marilyn first expressed her love to James, it amazed him that he could have such luck. It was as if America itself was taking him in. However, James's anxiety was not alleviated. Marilyn's mom was desperate and tried to stop the wedding after seeing that James was of Asian descent. The look in her eyes was fear, as if Marilyn were running along the edge of a cliff. "Think about your children," she said. "Where will you live? You won't fit in anywhere. You'll be sorry for the rest of your life." [Celeste Ng, 2015] The

western normative and evaluative systems dominated his life that James was always in constant fear and uncertainty after marriage.

Additionally, Nath, the eldest son of the family, was always ignored because of his typical oriental face, yellow skin, dark hair, short building and introverted personality. James wanted his son to grow into a different person, a person who could make friends with white children, and a person who can fit in. This is the ideal identity in the mind of James. However, he got his first and most painful puncture in his fatherly dreams when Nath was a first grader. There was one time when Nath was messed around in a swimming pool and kids shouted “Chink can’t find China!” in his face. James had gone through this so many times before and he knew what it was like to be teased, what it was like to never fit in. But instead of hugging and comforting his son, he took the side of the white and told him that it was not personal, that it was ridiculous of him not being able to take jokes. The truth is Nath reminded him more and more of himself, or everything he wanted to forget from his own boyhood. He knew that Nath was becoming a reflex, one that left him painful and ashamed. In contrast, the middle child, Lydia, was the one perpetually on their mother’s mind, the one their father kissed first, every night, when he came home. She was so fussed over, so carefully tended, like a prize flower. It looked that Lydia did succeed in interpersonal relationships as her father expected. But the truth is Lydia has feigned normality — by pretending to talk to friends on the phone or hang out with friends over movies. She had tried to take on her parents’ unrealized goals as her own while repressing her own desires to placate her unhappy parents. James later was horrified to discover that instead of being popular and doing well in school, Lydia was actually a loner with almost no friends and that her grades had severely slipped. When Lydia’s death finally revealed this secret, the illusion of James’ “integration” was completely shattered. It can be seen that intermarriage does not work wonders in solving the identity problem and helping the Chinese and white communities to achieve seamless integration. Even children of mixed backgrounds often struggle to find their place. They will also be marginalized or subject to more identity confusion. This kind of marriage does not seem to solve the racial problem in one go, and then realize the reconstruction of ethnic identity.

## **Historical and Cultural Context and**

### **Psychological Interpretation of James'**

#### **Identity Anxiety**

It is common to see that Individuals work hard to construct their identity so as to obtain a sense of psychological security, and they also strive to maintain, protect, and strengthen their identity to keep this security, which is crucial for their well-being. [Le Daiyun, 1999] James’s cultural, economic, and genetic efforts did not help to alleviate his identity anxieties. His anxiety about identity and the inability to get the approval of mainstream society can be felt throughout the text. In such a binary society, social or economic mobility does not necessarily mean the recognition from the mainstream group. Therefore, he can only be a victim of that era. [Chen Jing, 2018] Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor believes that “the concept of modern self is the result of a series of moral and ethical conflicts in a specific historical context.” [Charles Taylor, 2002] Therefore, to further explore the underlying causes of James's identity anxiety and identity

crisis, it is necessary to make some research into the historical and cultural context of the era in which the novel is set.

James was born and raised in the United States, but his parents were illegal immigrants to the United States in the 1930s, when China was plagued by turbulence and poverty. A large number of people tried to make their way into America from their war-torn homeland. While Under the influence of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese immigrants were banned from the country for more than half a century. Only the children of those already in the States could enter. James's father had come to California under a false name, pretending to be the son of a neighbor who had emigrated there some years earlier. It was the common practice for many Chinese who longed to make their fortunes to adopt the names of those mythical sons and make the long journey across the sea. In China towns, the lives of all those *paper sons* were fragile and easily torn. Everyone's name was false. In the 1960s and 1970s, when ethnic issues were still a major concern, almost every Chinese American had a fear of being crowded out and everyone clustered together so they wouldn't stand out. [Zhang Dongmei, 2018] In this social context, the embarrassment and fear of "being different in school" had been hovering over James. Being indistinguishable and blending in was always the hope of James. He was going through not only the crisis of "human self-perception", but also the crisis of "interpersonal relationships and a series of values and beliefs formed in his interaction with others, [Yangjun, 2013]. He had no way to fit into the white mainstream society, nor did he try to know himself, to hope, or to search for other belongings, but made every efforts to suppress, to avoid or to hide his inferiority.

James did not ask himself whether he "exists" or "who am I?" Instead, he focused on his position and kept asking "Where am I?" It's said that in achievement domains, where people are concerned about the evaluations of others, individuals are likely to engage in self-protection by seeing one-self more positively, as well as to seek out enhancing appraisals from others, [Michael W. Kraus, 2015]. In order to fit in the white mainstream society and complete the identity construction of "I", James exaggerated the symbolic significance of university teaching job and his interracial marriage, ignoring or even abandoning his family roots in the hope of constructing a self-deceptive identity recognized by the American society. This kind of rejection and abandoning of oneself is actually what Julia (a French psychologist) called "abjection". Julia Kristeva put forward the concept of "abjection" in her book *Powers of Horror*. She suggests "abjection" is "rejection and abandonment of oneself". It rejects some defining parts of self, the existence of which is believed to belittle him and obscures the boundary between "self" and "others", [Christiwa Julia, Zhangxinmu, 2018]. By doing so, the ideal self is thus defined.

After the wedding, James didn't have the nerve to tell Marilyn his family background. He proposed that the two should let the past drift away, stop asking questions, look forward from then on and never back, because abandoning the past was to get rid of his ethnic identity, and looking backwards meant holding on to the history of his forefathers. He was afraid that once he admitted them, she would see him as he had always seen himself: an imposter and a scrawny outcast, feeding on scraps, reciting his lines and trying to pass. [Celeste Ng, 2015] He was afraid she would never see him any other way and thereafter lose her respect and affection. This abjection can also be found in James's preference to Lydia. Lydia was regarded by James as a

successful product of racial integration for having her mother's blue eyes, and thus had to take her father's expectation of blending in. His ambitions hovered like a cloud over the family. He hoped that Lydia would no longer "stand out". He bought Lydia the clothes displayed in the window because most of them would be liked by others; he signed her up for the dance class because this was what everyone was doing; he gave Lydia a silver necklace as birthday present because "everyone wears silver this year." And he gave Lydia the book *How to Win Friends and Influence People---Fundamental Techniques in Handling People*.

Making friends and being popular is taken as the apex of American achievement. He believed that if he'd had the book when he was young, perhaps, everything would have been different; If he had known how to handle people, how to make them like him, perhaps he'd have fit in at Lloyd, he'd have charmed Marilyn's mother, they'd have hired him at Harvard. He'd have gotten more out of life. Unfortunately, this overwhelming enthusiasm and act caused by his abject mentality did not gain his daughter and him friendship, but plagued them with traumas and devastations from the loss of friendship and eventually flung them into immense anxiety. Julia said the self-abased is literally a forsaken person. He is (self) placed, (self) separated, (self) positioned, unable to establish his own personality and achieve his dignity. [Christiwa Julia, Zhangxinmu, 2018] James and his wife had different perceptions to "being different." More than anything, Marilyn wanted to stand out. When she said "I thought you were different", what she meant was: I thought you were better than other men. I thought you wanted better than that. But James heard something else, "You got tired of different, didn't you? He says, I am too different. You think it's such a good thing, standing out. You've never been in a room where no one else looked like you. You've never had people mock you to your face. You've never been treated like a stranger. You have no idea what it's like, being different." [Celeste Ng, 2015] The constant rejection and exclusion led to his self-denial and self-deprecation. More than anything, he wanted to blend in the mainstream Caucasian society. As for him, "being different" means being despised, being laughed at, and being deprived of his rights. Because of the abjection mentality, James was extremely afraid of deficiency and deprivation, which could explain his constant fears. After getting married to Marilyn, he had been fearing that one day the universe would notice he wasn't supposed to have her and take her away, or that she might suddenly realize her mistake and disappear from his life as suddenly as she had entered. After a while, the fear became a habit, too.

After remaining a homemaker for eight years, Marilyn intended to leave home and resume her studies to become a doctor. The departure of her gnawed at James quietly, a dull and spreading hurt. He kept thinking of Marilyn's words: "I realize that I am not happy with the life I lead. I always had one kind of life in mind and things had turned out very differently." [Celeste Ng, 2015] James was sensitive and vulnerable as a consequence of the ever-lasting abjection mentality. He believed that Marilyn had left because he and the children were Asian and that she no longer wanted to deal with the societal pressure of being outsiders, that she resented their marriage because he and the children were not white. It had only been a matter of time for a wife like Marilyn to leave a husband like him. Marilyn's brief desertion from home is misunderstood by James as confirmation of his undesirable otherness. This old fears that laid coiled in his mind made him think he was imbecile and doomed and his blood were poison, which even made him

regret that his daughter had ever existed. James tried to part with this abjection and once in a while he did have the illusion that he had fit into the Caucasian society. However, abjection is a territory that can be forgotten, and it is also a territory that always flashes through your mind. Deep inside, he was still extremely sensitive and vulnerable, and he had never shaken his sense of loneliness. After Lydia's disappearance, Marilyn furiously accused James of bowing to the police. She said, "I know how to think for myself, you know. Unlike some people, I don't just kowtow to the police." [Celeste Ng, 2015] She used the word "kowtow" with a cultural connotation, which "rifles from her mouth and lodges deep in James's chest." [Celeste Ng, 2015] From those two syllables, he saw those bent-backed and pigtailed coolies in cone hats, squinty and servile, bowing and belittled. He had long suspected that everyone saw him this way, but he had not thought that everyone included Marilyn. He could tell the palpable disgust in her voice, how little she thought of him.

Marilyn's words proved what James had feared all along: deep inside, all along, she'd labeled everything, white and not white. This thing makes all the difference in the world. The silence between them thereafter thickened, like ice. Stuart Hall pointed out "racial differences are often strengthened and fixed by means of biological features in binary or mixed cultures, thereby emphasizing their natural differences and justifying racism and social injustice." [Stuart Hall, 2013] While the American exceptionalism holds U.S. political mechanism, as opposed to the deep-rooted class and racial stereotypes in Europe, is more favorable to immigrants, the truth is racism, which is the extreme form of politicizing the biological characteristics of ethnic groups, is not rare in the U.S. [Yu Bin, 2013] It can be seen from the previous analysis that James's abjection is the immediate result of racial discrimination and cultural oppression. Chinese Americans were turned into the other in the binary opposition. Lydia's death broke the illusion of James and unveiled the spiritual crisis faced by ethnic minorities in the U.S. As minors in American society, Chinese Americans have always been excluded from mainstream culture and have always been marginalized. For Chinese immigrants, the change of their class identity is not only restricted by financial conditions but also by their ethnic identity. Even if you get the identity of Asian Americans, you can't be regarded as the "real Americans", because of their exotic skin colors and bloodlines. They will eventually face the glass ceiling of racial classification. Chinese Americans still have to ask themselves a series of questions such as "Who am I? What is the meaning of my existence? What is my value?" People can't always gain recognition from the target society by changing roles or by subjective self-categorization. The change of personal identity is ultimately subject to the status of the group as a whole. As long as racial discrimination persists and the target society remains impermeable, James's identity anxiety and identity crisis will never end, which is also the source of anxiety for other immigrants.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of identity is not only a major concern for Chinese Americans, but also the universal demand for all modern people who aspire for recognition from others. Research in psychology using the Stereotype Content Model demonstrates that those from lower backgrounds are, in fact, labeled based on some human difference (s), associated with

undesirable traits, treated as an outgroup, and discriminated against. [Zeng Siyi, 2017]. Awareness of the threat to personal identity is not confined to a small circle of intellectuals, but manifest itself at all levels of the population.

### **Recommendations**

A good society should be one in which individuals have adequate psychological resources for successful self-realization where each member of the society can enjoy the non-instrumental concern for their well-being, the basic rights attributed to them, the equal standing in the realm of law, and also the sense of worth as contributing members of the society.



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