

FLUIDITY OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN DAVID HENRY HWANG'S GOLDEN CHILD

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Abstract— Religion plays a significant role in the lives of human beings, yet, religious fluidity has its own consequences. This paper aims at investigating the impact of religious fluidity on the identity of an early twentieth-century Chinese family. Golden Child illustrates how a devoted Confucian Chinese struggles to leave parts of his culture behind by converting to Christianity. Tieng-Bin's conversion brings good and bad consequences to his household. The story ends with the death of Tieng-Bin's two wives, on the one hand, and with rebirth of Tieng-Bin's daughter, Ahn, on the other hand.

Keywords— Religious Identity, Foot Binding, Christianity, Confucianism, Tieng-Bin.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Golden Child (1998), Hwang discusses a crucial question in man's life. He discusses the relation of religious conversion to identity formation process. In fact, the play deals with the protagonist conversion to Christianity and forsaking his ancestors' religion, Confucianism.

The story of Golden Child is told by Andrew Kwong, a writer, and his grandmother's ghost, Ahn, who tells him about her father, Eng Tieng-Bin, and his three wives; Siu-Yong, Eng-Luan, and Eng-Eling. Tieng-Bin has travelled and brought three Western gifts to his wives; a cuckoo clock to Siu-Yong, a waffle iron to Luan, and phonograph player to Eling. Each gift has its symbolic meaning. The first two gifts indicate that the first and second wives are traditional wives who keep the system of the house and make banquets, while the third wife represents his true love. Through these gifts, the actual identity of each wife is defined. Tieng-Bin has, also, met white Christian sailors who tell him about Christianity and consequently make him question his own religion.

In his dissertation, "Religious Identity and Social engagement" (2007), Bryan C. Shepherd deals with religious identity and mentions that the earlier works in this field reveal many facts about this kind of identity [1, p.13]. Among these facts is the flexibility of religious identity because "it can change as a result of internal and external forces" [Ibid.]. Internal forces are usually related to the persons' inner sense of dissatisfaction and questioning of the validity of some religious beliefs and practices. External forces which originate in the outside world sometimes impinge on the individuals religious choices. They attract them and make them question their religious identity. These forces create an inner conflict within the individuals that impels them to choose an appropriate identity that suits his situation and life.

Both internal and external forces are at play in Hwang's Golden Child which depicts this change in religious identity, as the protagonist Tieng-Bin converts from Confucianism to Christianity. This change is triggered by Tieng-Bin's dissatisfaction in his religious beliefs and practices which is considered one of the strongest internal forces. Tieng-Bin's travel to the Philippines, his staying there for three years, the influence of the Western people he has met there, as well as the influence of Reverend Baines, the missionary, who pays many visits to Tieng-Bin's household are considered external forces. Baines' lectures are attended by Tieng-Bin's second wife, Luan, and his daughter, Ahn. In addition to these forces, the readiness and the willingness of Tieng-Bin to conversion may be added.

II. HWANG'S ROOTS AND GOLDEN CHILD

Interestingly, through Golden Child, Hwang revives his family's history when his great grandfather converted to Christianity [2, p.77], and as a result, the whole family became Christians. Thus, Hwang recognizes the importance of the relationship between religion and history. About his great grandfather's decision to convert to Christianity, Hwang says, "He understands the importance of such a decision in disrupting his own [religious] identity"[2, p. 80]. That is why he wants to go back to the Philippines. The play, however, achieves great success in Singapore and establishes a personal connection between the dramatist and his audience. Regarding this, Hwang comments saying that "many of whom [Singaporean Chinese] told me that the work had caused them to rediscover their own ancestral histories"[3, p.ix]. Finding out their history is very important to people, since they cannot cut their roots and live only by the present. This means the religious identity of Hwang's great-grandfather is liable to change, and accordingly his whole family.

The source of the play was derived from Hwang's writing when he was ten years old [4, p.1]. He heard about his grandmother's illness and asked his parents to go to the Philippines to learn more about his roots [2, p. 77]. Hwang decided to know his family's history:

It is a sort of striking really that I thought it was important to know what my family history was, and that I want to see her [his grandmother] that summer and did the oral histories. In retrospect I think it has to do with needing to understand myself in the context of being a Chinese- American growing up in Southern California, where there were a lot fewer Asians than there are now. [qtd.in 4, p.2]

In fact, at an early age, Hwang feels the significance of his family's history. He wants to expose his identity as a Chinese American. He has recorded his grandmother's stories and made them into a novella called *Only Three Generations* [2, 3, 5]. The title was motivated by the Chinese proverb "The wealth of a Chinese family lasts only three generations." [2, p.77]

Another point about Hwang's identity is that he knows that the Asian American stereotype of "Charlie Chan" or "Fu Manchu" is an exaggerated and distorted image of the Asian American people. He hopes to give more authentic and humanistic image of his own people in his writing.

In relation to this, Hwang recounts his personal experience when he was ten years old:

At ten, could I have known that my adult self would one day return to this work? Probably not. But something at that young age did compel me to record these stories, to ensure that my life as an American would exist in a context more real and human than "Charlie Chans" or "Fu Manchus" I saw on television or in the movies. [3, p.vi]

That is why he chooses to write about the history of his own family. Hwang, however, recounts his family's history as it happens in *Golden Child*:

As in the play my great-grandfather did convert to Christianity, at which point he unbound his daughter's feet. The first and the third of his wives died and he was left with the one who was the most ambitious. My grandmother's mother, his first wife, died of opium addiction. And my grandmother is, to this day, very fundamentalist Christian in her religious beliefs.

[qtd.in 6, p.16]

Hwang points out that his great-grandfather's decision of unbinding his daughter's feet is a great one since it breaks with "a centuries- old tradition" and challenges a tradition that makes women lame in the name of beauty [2, p.80]. Such decision represents a big challenge that Hwang's great-grandfather undertakes; as a mature man he knows the consequences of it. Yet, he insists on carrying it on.

III. FOOT BINDING

Historically speaking, foot binding was originated in court dancers in late Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD), especially amongst women of high class [5, p.22]. William A. Rossi observes that about 100% of the high class women in the nineteenth century bound their feet in China [5]. It seems that those women wanted to be distinguished. This was also a way of getting a husband. The practice of foot-binding, however, ended in the early twentieth century partly because of anti-foot-binding campaigns [5], and partly because of the influence of Christianity.

Hwang prepares the audience to the change in Tieng-Bin's household in more than one way. When Tieng-Bin returns, he criticizes the Chinese old traditions of foot binding

as Ahn complains of her painful and smelling feet. He says, "The world is changing. There's a whole new generation of men who will want an educated wife. Not some backward girl hobbling around on rotting feet, filling the room with the stench of death" [7, p.13].

Western costume is another aspect in *Golden Child* that illustrates the painful practice of foot binding. Luan, Tieng-Bin's second wife, changes her appearance and appears to Baines in the Western dress to prove that she is modern. By doing this she tries to change her Chinese identity, which is not easy for her despite her readiness to do so. She is shocked by her inability to wear high heels shoes because of her binding feet. For that reason, she decides to give them to Ahn:

TIENG-BIN: You look so-

LUAN: Atrocious-

TIENG-BIN: Exotic...

[]

TIENG-BIN: The mysterious Occidental.

BAINES: Very modern.

[]

LUAN: But I could never be as graceful as those Western women. To get into those shoes- did you realize, they actually walk on their toes?

BAINES: Chinese women –no can?

LUAN (To Baines): Well, you see, most of us lost our toes years ago ...

BAINES: Oh... I see...

LUAN: Maybe I could give my Western shoes to Ahn, For when she is older. [7, pp. 35-36]

The west is associated with modernity, and Luan wants to be modern. She changes herself to the extent that she astonishes her husband as he says, "I'm amazed that you can transform yourself ...into an entirely different person"[7, p.36]. Although this change is in appearance only, Luan asks Tieng-Bin to provide a Western suit for their son, Yung-Bin. By this change, she wants to attract the attention of her husband and be his only wife.

IV. CHRISTIANITY, CONFUCIANISM, AND GOLDEN CHILD

Hwang in *Golden Child* depicts two worlds; the world of Christianity, and the world of Confucianism. While Christianity appreciates human dignity, mercy, and individuality [8, p.1], Confucianism values old traditions and ancestors, [9]. Tieng-Bin is attracted to the new religion, because of the opportunities this religion offers to make him live a more satisfactory life.

The Chinese appreciate the dead and take care of their graves because they believe that ghosts are the souls of the dead families, and if they are not attended by their families they will wander the earth seeking another family [10, p.1.]. Hwang makes this clear in the reaction of Tieng-Bin's third wife, Eling, when he explains his future plans to her after his conversion to Christianity. When he explains to her the

necessity of destroying the family alters and then traveling to the Philippines, Eling reacts: "You want me to abandon my parents? Let their spirits wander alone for eternity? ... Is that what's best for us? To forget about others, and think only about ourselves? [7, p. 45.]. Eling has a conflict between her worship to her parents and loyalty to old tradition and her loyalty to her husband and the new religion.

The ghost of Ahn tells Andrew the history of the family in order to pass it to the next generation. In this respect, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) says "every period has its ghosts (and we have ours), its own experience, its own medium, and its proper hauntological media" [qtd.in 11, p. 21.]. Ahn's spirit is not back for revenge, but she conveys a message to Andrew, who is about to be a father [11].

According to Joseph Kai-Hang Cheang (2010), the word "golden" of the title has two different meanings in the two cultures [11, p.21.]. In Chinese culture, it means precious, while in the West it means silent [11]. So, as a child, Ahn is mute, she only gains her voice and tells her stories in her afterlife [11]. But Ahn is outspoken from the beginning. Her father recognizes her by the mouth, the very organ of speech as he says "Oh, that mouth! You must be Ahn!" [7, p.12.]. She complains to her father about her foot-binding as she says, "My feet hurt so bad at night-and they stink, too!

[7, p.13] She knows that her father is an open-minded man will listen to her and will put an end to her pain.

When the dramatist is asked about the presence of ghosts in the play, Hwang says in an interview that this presence suggests that one cannot separate himself from the past however hard he tries, but he still hears its voices:

In my own life, although I've turned away from fundamentalist Christianity, I can't stop hearing those voices-there's still part of me that believes I'm going to Hell. I sometimes think of this play as another form of ancestor worship. I'm conjuring up the ghosts of my ancestors in my own mind and trying to reconcile myself to them. I don't know if anything I've written is true. But it allows me to feel that I have a connection to my ancestors, and to try to understand their motivations, so that I feel more able to deal with the next generation.

[qtd.in 6, p.82]

It is part of Hwang's heritage, that he worships his ancestors. Accordingly, this play can be considered an expression of this worship. In this context, he will have the power to pass history and explain things to the future generations. This is explained because Golden Child is motivated by the birth of his child Noah [12, p.130]. In a sense, Hwang tries to make his son aware of his roots and his real identity. Apparently, his great-grandfather suffers a lot from his conversion into Christianity. But the fruit of this change is for the welfare of the future generations.

According to William Boles (2013), Tieng-Bin has suffered because of the conflict between his commitment to

his ancestors and the attraction of the new religion [2, p.84.]. As a Chinese, Tieng-Bin feels obliged to his ancestors and, at the same time, he cannot resist the attraction of Christianity. As a Confucian he has to keep his three wives and let his daughter suffering from foot-binding, while the new religion enables him to choose one wife that he loves, since Christianity allows him to have only one wife [2, p.85], and liberates his daughter from the enslavement of his traditions. At a certain point, the dramatist emphasizes the past as a reservoir of traditions and belongings. When asked by Baines whether he wants to forget his family like the white sailors, Tieng-Bin suggests that he will remember it:

TIENG-BIN: No, no, it's- how can I put this? It's not that I want to forget my family, quite the opposite. But to be Chinese- means to feel a whole web of obligation-obligation?- dating back 5,000 years. I am afraid of dishonoring my ancestors, even the ones dead for centuries. All the time, I feel ghosts-sitting on my back, whispering in my ear- keeping me from living life as I see fit.

[7, pp.33-34]

Tieng-Bin pictures his conflict with deep rooted traditions and the result of disconnecting oneself from the past. His obligation to the dead prevents him from living a normal life as an individual. As a result he suffers greatly.

This brings to mind the translation of Confucius' saying by Leung, "Contentedness lead(s) to loss, humility leads to gain" [13], which Chinese parents believe that too much praise may have a negative effect on their children's achievement [14, p.11.]. Therefore, Chinese parents often "provide lower amounts of praise "to their children's achievement" [14]. That is why Chinese people are not used to praise and feel it is improper to praise oneself. Tieng -Bin is surprised by the sailors' talk about themselves. The following exchange between Tieng-Bin and Baines illustrates this point:

TIENG-BIN: I deal with a lot of white men in my business ...

[]

TIENG-BIN: Yes, I've seen this and it's remarkable.

I'll tell you, Reverend- I once listened to some white sailors talking to each other. One said: "I can lift two hundred pounds." Another said: "I have an education." A third said: "In my life, I have saved a fortune." I was amazed.

BAINES: They brag. Not so nice.

TIENG-BIN: No, in a way, wonderful. That they feel so free to say who they are, without worrying that they're making someone else in the group feel small by their boasting. [7, pp.33-34.]

Baines confirms to Tieng-Bin that by paying attention to other people's suffering, he proves himself to be unique. In this sense, he gains individuality. This means that, Tieng-Bin has a flexible character that can be influenced easily by western culture.

As Christianity confirms one's personality, Confucianism stresses one's family. According to Huang and Gove, disobeying parents is unacceptable and will result in unforgiving penalty [14, p.11]. Tieng-Bin thinks that after embracing Western religion his parents will punish him for abandoning their religion. In the final Act, he makes this quite clear:

TIENG-BIN: ...Papa, Mama- this is how you punish a disobedient son? Take from me the wife I love, even the wife I respect, leaving me with the one whom I feel... nothing. I don't give a damn anymore about the living or the dead. [7, p.59.]

In old China, education had a significant value. Education is "almost like a religious practice" which has its effect on the family's daily life [14, p.12.]. Chinese people recognized that education led to luxurious life. There was, however, a central national exam, one had to pass in order to become successful in education and gain high social status

[15, pp.17-18.]. But women were not allowed to join men in the educational process [14, p.11]. As in other traditional patriarchal societies, women were oppressed in old China, as they were deprived of education and their own right in choosing their partners in life was usurped. Accordingly converting to Christianity was an advantage to them. It provided them with education and made them equal to men.

The society before Christ, however, was a male-centered one [16, p.82.]. But Christ established new rules of equality between men and women [16]. Bilezikian states that the Bible "teaches the full equality of men and women in Creation and Redemption" [17, p.1.]. It is clear in Genesis 1, Verse 27 that men and women are equal before God, "And God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female he created them." All of mankind is created in the image of God. Tieng-Bin supports Christianity, and Ahn follows his example.

As Ahn represents the young generation, she tells her father that her mother is wrong in worshipping her parents and maintaining their old religion. She decides to stick to the new religion to be born again:

AHN: No-she (her mother) was wrong, Papa. (Pause) Mama believed in our ancestors; she did everything for them. But when she called on them for help, there was nothing they could do. I watched her eat opium and die. So I'm not going to believe them anymore. I can't end up like her. I'm going to follow this new God, the one you brought into our home. Papa, we must all be born again. [7, pp. 59-60.]

Having new religion is a good reason for rebirth, consequently, starting a new life with a new religious identity.

At exceedingly illuminating moment of emotional intensity, Tieng-Bin explores his daughter's feeling for what he has done to her mother and the whole family:

TIENG-BIN: Daughter-someday, when you are all grown, you will look back and hate me-for what I did to your mother.

AHN: Impossible, Papa. When my children ask about our family ... - how you made us all born again. But First Wife, I will not-no, I swear, I will not even remember her name.

(Ahn begins to cry)
[7, p.60.]

Ahn is proud of her father's conversion to Christianity, since it represents a rebirth and a new life to the whole family.

It seems that Andrew wants to avoid the painful experience of his grandfather since he does not want to be a father. He reveals to his grandmother, after hearing her stories:

ANDREW: You see? Why I don't want to become a parent?

Your father tried so hard, but he only brought tragedy to himself and everyone around him.

AHN: No. He suffers to bring family into future. Where better life, I am able to live. I first girl in family go school, choose own husband-and all the time, worship Jesus. []

AHN: My father, Tieng-Bin-this one thing I will never forget: you see, he is the one... who take the binding from my feet.
[7, p.61.]

Thus, Ahn summarizes the benefits of her father's conversion to Christianity. She, at last, convinces Andrew to pass her stories to the next generation represented by his own child:

ANDREW: I want to preserve this. For our child. Like my mother did for me. []

AHN: Next- you must buy nice house in suburb.
[7, p.62.]

The influence of the ancestors is still strong on Andrew as Ahn succeeds in persuading him to tell their tales to the next generations. Thus, Andrew contemplates his unborn child:

I watch your mother sleeping, knowing you are growing inside her. And suddenly the room is filled with spirits-so many faces, looking down on me...And I realize my face too will one day join this constellation. Perhaps, if I only do my best, in the imagination of my descendants, I may also one day be born again. I feel the eyes of our ancestors upon us, all awaiting together the birth of you, my Golden Child.
[7, p.62.]

Andrew thinks that, perhaps, he will be born again and find his own identity as a Christian Chinese American on another day. He also calls his baby "Golden Child" as an indication of repeating the same experience of his grandfather, and transmitting his story to the future generations. In the first Act, the audience hear the following exchange:

ANDREW: Ma, I've never wanted to become a father. This pregnancy- it happened by accident.

. AHN: This may be last chance God give you- to make new life

ANDREW: You were always hounding me: have children, go to church, follow Jesus' plan. I've never wanted anything to do with that sort of life.

AHN: You never go church, this your third wife. Already you prove you are big sinner. Now baby- on the way, Andrew. Time to cast out demon of your anger. Time you hear my story again- not with ear only, but also with spirit.

ANDREW: Sorry, but that's the last thing I need right now.

AHN: No- is the only thing you need.
[7, p.6.]

It seems that Andrew does not want to be a father to avoid suffering, while Ahn insists to tell her story to Andrew to make him know his history and act accordingly. In this way, she tries to encourage him to explore his true identity.

Explaining his future arrangements after converting to Christianity, Tieng-Bin says to his third wife:

TIENG-BIN: You. In a sense. He [Baines] says I can pull the family altars, live as though I had only one wife, even take you with me back to the Philippines.

Eling pulls away from him (Don't you like the idea? Can't you see, it's the best thing for you?) []

TIENG-BIN: I thought you wanted to be modern.

ELING: I do. But does that mean I can no longer be Chinese?

[7, pp.44-45.]

As a simple traditional peasant woman, Eling, thinks that the act of destroying the family's altar means taking her Chinese identity away. She will be anyone but not Chinese. She is unable to endure this, despite her great love to her husband.

In contrast to her, Tieng-Bin believes that this act is a rebirth. He will start a new life. He will be liberated from the chains of his ancestors. Out of his three wives, he will choose the one he loves. Accordingly, his religious identity will be changed, because he is going to be a Christian Chinese. Baines tries to help him by explaining these things to him:

BAINES: Good, Bible say, truth shall set you free.

TIENG-BIN: And I live a new time, much different from that of my fathers.

BAINES: Yes, must be born again.

TIENG-BIN: I should be able to make my own way, live my own life, choose the woman I love.

BAINES: Prophet Paul say, "All I do mean nothing- if I no love" []

BAINES: Now, dead-no more power over you.

TIENG-BIN: Yes. The dead are just earth and dust and bones.

. He kneels before the altar
(Papa, Mama-you gave me life)

But now I am a man. And you... you are dead
7, pp.42-43.]

Thus, Baines sums up the process of conversion to Christianity by three words; freedom, rebirth, and independent decision making.

CONCLUSION

The fluidity of religious identity, accordingly, has two sides; negative and positive. It is negative because it destroys Tieng-Bin's family. It leads to the death of three of his family's members; the death of his beloved, third wife, Eling, with her baby, during childbirth, and the death of his first wife, Siu-Young, by suicide. The positive force, of this change, is liberating his favorite daughter, Ahn, from the old tradition of binding her feet, and providing her with a better opportunity of education and granting her the freedom to choose her own husband. Nevertheless, this change has its impact on Tieng-Bin's identity. He is reborn again as a Christian Chinese individual. He hints that the future of his sons will be in America as he says to Eling, "Italy can never be ignored, but the future-it comes from America" [7, p.43.]. As a result, they will be Christian Chinese Americans like Andrew and his future son.

It seems that Hwang cannot ignore the influence of his Chinese roots, although he was born in his parents' new country. He seems to be against total assimilation. He confirms that, "there is an easy certainty in being anti-assimilationist, but that's all" [qtd.in 18, p.1.]. Luan tries to assimilate but the result is that she looks "exotic," "atrocious," and "the mysterious Occidental." Another example is Tieng-Bin, who after the death of Eling, burns offerings and speaks of ideal words of change:

How can I make you understand that I did it for you? You must take... everything with you-all my ideals, my experience with far-off peoples-all the room I've filled to bursting with empty words-words of change, of progress-all the rooms where I had hidden our future." [7, pp.59-60.]

In Golden Child there is a blending of Christianity and Chinese old traditions [2, p.86.]. Despite the fact that the new religion leads to liberty, individualism and mercy, the influence of the old religion and ancestors is strong. The protagonist struggles greatly for the well-being of his future generations. There will be another Golden Child who will continue Ahn's message and pass her family's history to the Chinese American next generations. Golden Child is a journey that Hwang makes to explore his own identity as a Chinese Christian who lives in America. In relation to this, Boles notes, "After all, his [Hwang's] entire identity, has been framed through his relationship to his ancestors" [2, p.84.].

Hwang said in an interview the next day at his parents' new home in suburban San Marino; "How much do I want to be an Asian-American playwright? How much do I want to be an American playwright? In my life, I think I continue to try and make the distinction between what is Christian and

Western in my background and what is Chinese" [4]. So Hwang goes on in this journey to search for his identity, and never stops until he achieves his goal.

NOTES

¹David Henry Hwang is one of the most successful Chinese American playwrights. He was born in 1957, in San Gabriel, California, a Los Angeles suburb. Hwang's father, Henry Y. Hwang, was born in Shanghai in China and immigrated to California in the late 1940s to study business at the University of Southern California, where he met his wife, Dorothy, who was studying classical music at the same university. Hwang's mother was born in Amoy in Southeast China but grew up in the Philippines. She was a brilliant musician from a prosperous family. His father was the founder of the first Asian American bank in the United States (Far East National Bank in Los Angeles). In an interview for Hong Kong's South China Morning Post, Hwang speaks of the family's identity crisis: "My father came from Shanghai and my mother was Pilipino Chinese. They speak English in the home: they wanted to assimilate, and wanted their children to assimilate. Nevertheless that they were torn" (qtd. in Street 1989, 8). This impels the dramatist to ask the question "who is he?" and discusses it in his dramatic works. The answers to this question are as diverse as the characters' backgrounds, beliefs and attitudes themselves. The question, Hwang believes, is essential and relevant to him as well as to other Chinese living in the United States. In this particular sense, and in another interview, Hwang describes his father:

My father has always been interested in discarding the past. He [ha]s never much liked China, or the whole idea about China, or Chinese ways of thinking. He [ha]s always been much more attracted to American ways of thinking. (qtd. in Gerard 1988,88)

Therefore, Hwang's knowledge of China and Chinese people come from relatives and contacts with other Chinese immigrants within the Evangelical Christian Church.

Hwang's works are: FOB (1979), The Dance and the Railroad and Family Devotions (1981), The House of Sleeping Beauties and The Sound of a Voice(1983), Rich Relations (1986), M. Butterfly (1988), Bondage(1992), Face Value (1993), Golden Child(1998), Trying to Find Chinatown (1996), Yellow Face (2007), Chinglish (2011)

See William C. Boles. 2013. Understanding David Henry Hwang (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press), p.2. Jeremy Gerard. 1988. David Hwang: Riding on the Hyphen. The New York Times Magazine 13, no.44: 88. Street, Douglas. 1989. David Henry Hwang (Boise: Boise State University), p.9.

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