

Girl in Translation

by Jean Kwok

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Reviewed by:

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Summary

According to the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) report *Beyond Myths: The Growth of Diversity of Asian American College Freshmen: 1971 – 2005*, “Asian Americans are currently the fastest growing sector of the U.S. college-going population and are an extremely diverse one with tremendous variations in ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and immigration patterns,” (2007, p. 1). Further, the report noted that this group of students was “attending a wide range of institutions across the country” (p. 1). It is within this increasingly diverse population that we find the story of Kimberly Chang, a Chinese born immigrant, in Jean Kwok’s *Girl in Translation*. This mass-market novel is a memoir loosely based on the author’s own experience of immigrating to the United States at a young age. Kwok writes with extreme precision and intimacy, describing the main character’s move and transition to a foreign and poverty stricken environment.

Eleven-year-old Kimberly and her mother immigrated to the United States in the early 1980’s. They arrived in suburban New York at the home of her Aunt Paula, an older sister to Kimberly’s mother. Prior to their arrival, Aunt Paula arranged for Kimberly and her mother to live in a run-down area of New York City and for Kimberly’s mother to work at a clothing factory. The apartment did not have heat; the only heat source available was from an open oven. The apartment was infested with cockroaches and rats which Kimberly trained herself not to hear scurrying in the middle of the night while she was trying to sleep.

Kimberly began school with excitement but was quickly deflated as an insensitive and sarcastic teacher quickly identifies her most self-conscious characteristic, lacking skills to speak and write English. Kimberly, however, found her confidence academically by excelling in math and science. Outside the classroom, she became an observer of culture, dissecting each interaction for cues. Kimberly was able to gain insight into the culture of her elementary school peers by befriending a fellow classmate, Annette. Annette explained what the boys were saying, why being a “know-it-all” was a problem, and what was meant by the “birds and the bees” (p. 62).

Each day after school Kimberly traveled alone across the New York City subway system to Chinatown to work alongside her mother in the clothing factory until late at night. Both adults and children were expected to work the long and arduous hours at the factory. Like Kimberly’s mother, hardly any of the factory workers spoke English and, therefore, this work was their only way to make a living and survive in the city.

Kimberly and her mother were charged with the task of “finishing” garments: “There was a long table and a towering stack of pressed clothing, which we were to hang, sort, belt or sash, tag and then bag in a sheath of plastic” (p. 31). Kimberly and her mother were paid 1.5 cents per skirt, and a portion of these funds were refunded to Aunt Paula for her generosity in paying for the two to come to the United States and for the rent on their apartment. Readers quickly grasp the mind of a child trying to make sense of a very desperate situation as Kimberly counts everything purchased in skirts—a \$2.99 dictionary to help her with her school assignments cost 200 finished skirts, the subway was 100 skirts, a pack of gum cost seven skirts.

Despite working long hours at night, Kimberly proved to be a strong student in her elementary school. With the help of a supportive guidance counselor, Kimberly's academic achievements were recognized, and she received a full scholarship to a prestigious private school in Brooklyn.

Kimberly described her struggles in early high school experience, such as receiving a "daily current-events quiz" in social studies where her teacher did not understand why students "couldn't simply watch the six-o'clock news each evening, or take a peek at [their] parents' *New York Times*" (p. 133). Throughout her schooling, Kimberly kept her life outside of school a secret. She did not tell anyone, including school officials, that she managed bitter cold winters with light clothing and little food, or that she worked until early hours of the morning helping her mother in the factory. Kimberly was embarrassed and feared others knowing about her poverty stricken situation. Kwok does not ask the reader to have pity on Kimberly and her mother; rather, she presents their life in realistic, tangible terms.

Kimberly continued to excel in school, attending both college and medical school with the assistance of need-based and merit-based financial aid. Without giving too many spoilers, Kimberly also finds herself in the middle of an intense love triangle and experiences true intimacy with a childhood friend.

Application

In higher education, *Girl in Translation* can be used as a new student reader focusing on one or both of the main themes that resonate from the book—the Asian American immigrant experience and poverty.

A report produced by the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE) indicates that the Asian American and Pacific Islander population is an:

incredibly heterogeneous group of people, and there is simply no single narrative that can capture the range of educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes they encounter.... [L]arge sectors of the AAPI population suffer from high secondary school drop-out rates, low rates of college participation and low two- and four-year college completion rates. (2010, pp. 3,6)

Reports from both CARE and HERI reflect that the "model minority" stereotype is a myth. The CARE report notes:

The dominant narrative about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in higher education is that they are a model minority—a racial group with disproportionately high enrollment in highly selective, four-year institutions and such academic fields as science, technology, engineering, and mathematic. (2010, pp. 3, 6)

This statement from CARE and message of the HERI report supports not stereotyping Asian American students as the model minority and recognizing the importance of diversity within the population. Therefore, while it is vital not to over-generalize the experience of Kimberly's experience as a Chinese immigrant to other Asian American and Pacific Islanders, *Girl in Translation* does touch on the topics raised in the reports: the immigrant experience, the educational struggles of an Asian immigrant student, and the misconstrued stereotype of a model minority.

The issue of poverty pervaded the story and was carefully entwined with the immigrant experience. Kimberly's mother worked long hours in a dangerous, questionably legal factory for very little money. Her mother was trapped in many ways, having to repay her sister and lacking the English language skills necessary to compete for employment outside the factory. Kimberly had

access to scant resources, and this is a reality for many immigrant students coming into higher education.

Because Kimberly's cultural experience is very different from the day-to-day reality of many people, *Girl in Translation* could be instructive in educating students in areas of cultural significance, immigration, or poverty. The book may be paired with speakers or exhibits to discuss the life of immigrants (particularly Asian immigrants), the difficulties of entering and navigating a new culture, and the inability to afford day-to-day necessities such as food and clothing when living in poverty.

As our world has become increasingly diverse and stories of poverty become more illuminated, it is possible that readers might have lived similar lives to Kimberly or know individuals who have experienced similar paths. Therefore, it is important to place *Girl in Translation* in context and respect that it is one person's story. At the same time, the pairing of this story with active learning would help students develop empathy and gain knowledge on how to take action to combat the social justice issues revealed in Kimberly's experience.

References

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