

**Research Article**

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**Identity negotiation and marginalization: The struggle for cultural  
assimilation of a Chinese-American teenager in the short film  
“Americanized” (2021)**

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**Abstract**

As a minority group in the United States, Chinese-Americans encounter a multitude of challenges throughout the process of integrating into the dominant societal structure. For Chinese-American adolescents, these challenges are particularly intricate, given that they are in a phase of self-discovery and face psychological issues related to maturity and existence. The short film “Americanized” (2021) portrays the phenomenon of identity negotiation experienced by the fifth generation of Chinese-Americans attempting to assimilate into both the African-American and Asian-American communities. However, due to a perceived lack of alignment with the cultural and normative expectations of both groups, the character ultimately becomes marginalized. Her efforts to negotiate her identity are evident in her use of linguistic styles, fashion, gestures, and elements of hip-hop culture that symbolize her identity, yet ultimately result in further alienation from both groups. This phenomenon illustrates the challenges Asian-American adolescents face in attempting to find a place between the two cultures, and underscores the complexity of the assimilation process that can result in identity marginalization.

**Keywords:** Chinese-American; adolescents; identity negotiation; assimilation challenges; marginalization; generational identity

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**1. Introduction**

Chinese-Americans have encountered various challenges as they have become integrated into the American culture and society. These dynamics encompass cultural adaptation, instances of discrimination, and the establishment of vibrant communities that honour their heritage while enriching the nation's multicultural fabric (Jiang, 2018). The ethnic group has faced significant difficulties in adapting to various aspects of life since their arrival in the United States. These challenges occur in both the interpersonal level and at the institutional level which manifest in various forms of legal discrimination. Takagi (1973) considers that this complex interplay of adaptation and resistance has shaped their identity, leading to a unique blend of traditional values and modern American influences that continue to evolve over generations.

Incidents of racial and discriminatory behavior have also occurred during the integration process, which has limited the ethnic group's ability to become accepted in society. A 2023 poll by the Pew Research Center indicates that 78% of Asian adults have experienced treatment as foreigners, despite being born in the United States (Ruiz et al., 2023). They further stated that it involves Asians reporting daily interactions with strangers in the U.S. who tell them to return to their country of origin,

feign inability to speak English, criticize their use of languages other than English in public, or mispronounce their names (Ruiz et al., 2023). For Chinese-Americans, discrimination in the form of unfavorable stereotypes, unjust treatment, or social exclusion frequently poses serious obstacles to complete integration. Chinese-American youth face especially difficult and complicated issues. They experience discrimination from a variety of sources while they search for their identity and develop psychologically. For Chinese-American teenagers the experiences of racism and exclusion can be perplexing and stressful. With regard to the aforementioned matter, it is stated that

“Adolescents need to develop a socially approved and positive sense of identity for a healthy transition to adult life. This task is particularly challenging for immigrant adolescents and adolescents whose parents were immigrants to the extent that what is considered a healthy and acceptable identity differs between their cultures of origin and residence. Immigrant-origin adolescents need to acquire bicultural/multicultural competence and an integrated sense of identity to navigate successfully and function effectively in their multicultural world” (Güngör D, 2023).

As a cultural product, films are similarly able to represent the social state of society, wherein they capture and record a range of societal phenomena in diverse scenes. Such scenes are imbued with meaning. These meanings are then subjected to analysis in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and social context in which they are situated. The 2021 short film, entitled “Americanized”, portrays the arduous process of a teenage descent of Chinese immigrant, now in their fifth generation, attempting to assimilate into an African-American community. The main character of “Americanized”, Eng, appears to be attempting to assimilate into the African-American community, exhibiting adjustments in several domains, including her attire, discourse, and linguistic style. However, rather than receiving a positive response, Eng encounters a lack of warmth and even displays cynicism from the majority of the community. The director of the film, Erica Eng herself affirms this by saying,

“This is my first narrative screenplay and I wrote this story based on my experiences growing up in Oakland as a fifth-generation Chinese-American. I had a hard time understanding what it meant to be Chinese because my family didn’t speak the language, cook the food, or practice many of the traditions. I didn’t feel fully Chinese, or fully American - I just felt lost”<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, Eng is regarded as “Americanized” by her Chinese-American counterparts, compounding the challenges she faces in integrating into both groups. In the initial observation, the experience of Eng’s exemplifies the assimilation process, which ultimately proved unsuccessful, resulting in marginalization. As defined by Russo (2024), assimilation is a process through which minority groups adopt the cultural attributes of the majority, thereby reducing cultural distance over time. The assimilation process presents numerous obstacles, the failure to overcome which may result in the marginalization of the individual in question, whether in terms of social or cultural integration. On this matter, Ritzer & Dean define the phenomenon as the process by which individuals or groups are rendered outsiders, experiencing exclusion from economic, social, or cultural engagement (2023).

This article seeks to examine the strategies the main character Eng employed to integrate into the African-American majority. The aforementioned efforts were not particularly successful in facilitating Eng’s integration into the African-American community. In the film, Eng frequently appears

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<sup>1</sup> The statement is part of the film overview which can be accessed through the website address:  
<https://filmfreeway.com/Americanized>

uncomfortable when interacting with this group. By the ending of the film, Eng has not been fully accepted by this community. Her efforts ultimately resulted in marginalization. This article will also examine the potential contributing factors that led to the marginalization towards Eng within the majority group.

## **2. Methods**

The present research employs a qualitative method of film analysis. In their 2020 study, Glad et al. define film analysis as a process through which a film is evaluated based on a range of criteria, including semiotics, narrative structure, cultural context, and mise-en-scène, as well as other approaches. Creswell (2021) characterizes qualitative research as an investigative method focused on comprehending social or human issues. This is achieved by building a complex and comprehensive picture, which is presented in the form of words. These words describe the detailed views of informants and are carried out in a natural context (1994: 1-2). I will focus their attention on the entirety of “Americanized” film, examining both visuals and speech as cultural and social events. The content analysis will be applied to examine the data. Prima (2022) characterizes it as a research methodology that entails the subjective interpretation of data content via systematic classification, coding, and the discovery of themes or patterns. In accordance with the aforementioned explanation, there are three principal approaches to qualitative content analysis: conventional, directed, and combined (Prima, 2022).

## **3. Results and Discussions**

### *3.1. Identity, Assimilation, dan Marginalization*

The concept of identity is relatively significant to the dynamics of social interaction among individuals and the broader society. The essence of an individual's identity profoundly influences one's self-perception and the perception of others within the intricate dynamics of socialization. Identities can be conveyed and shaped through the influences of culture, ideology, religion, ethnicity, and personal experiences. In this context, cultural elements can significantly shape the formation of identity. Culture affects identity by shaping the language, ideas, and behaviors that delineate group membership (Zhumadilova & Koptileuova, 2022). Hofstede in Hurn and Tomalin (2013:30) defines culture as the “collective programming of the mind,” with each individual's software being distinct. Hofstede (2013) asserts that this uniqueness is influenced by various elements, including familial background, educational experiences, neighborhood dynamics, community social contacts, and working environments. Furthermore, when the disparity in identity among individuals becomes excessive, social interaction may be disrupted. In turn, this could cause discord between individuals and the social framework. Identity differences that are not balanced by tolerance and accommodating attitudes may later facilitate prejudice, discrimination, and marginalization. In his theory of liminality, Homi K. Bhabha attempts to establish a connection between two disparate perspectives. This bridge, or liminal space, is a metaphorical representation of an unoccupied area where opposing viewpoints can be discussed and potentially transformed into a symbolically significant context. This is the site of identity construction. Identity is not constituted by a combination, diffusion, or mixture of components; rather, “...an energy field of different forces.” (Papastergiadis, 2000: 170).

Disparities in identity that may potentially precipitate conflict are sometimes associated with the necessity for one party to adapt to the more dominant one. Shadid (2007) in Chipindu and Koyuncu (2020) asserts that cultural influences affect individuals' behaviors and responses to various situations in distinct manners. For him, cultural elements, including religion, communication, values, and gender, significantly influence conflicts inside an organization (Shadid, 2007). By affirming and

embracing a new identity that is aligned with the majority, conflict will typically be less pronounced. Nevertheless, for an individual to come to accept the majority identity is not a straightforward process. Factors associated with physical or racial differences frequently constitute the primary impediments to assimilation in contexts where certain groups perceive that their identities are already exclusive. The process of acculturation is employed by individuals in order to adapt to the dominant culture and identity. As defined by Güngör (2023), acculturation signifies psychological transformations that emerge from cross-cultural relationships, which are examined through a range of theoretical frameworks. Referring to her notions, immigrants exhibit a range of attitudes and behaviors regarding their cultural identity and engagement with the host culture (Güngör, 2023). For her, the acculturation tactics that may be employed include integration, marginalization, isolation, and assimilation (Güngör, 2023).

Assimilation refers to the process whereby individuals or groups embrace the customs, values, and behaviors of a prevailing culture, often at the cost of their own cultural heritage (Oxford Review, 2024). An assimilation endeavor may occur at the individual level, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Voluntary assimilation may transpire when an individual perceives a new culture as more appealing or pragmatic about social interactions in their new environment. Conversely, forced assimilation transpires when an individual is compelled to engage with a dominant culture that is unlikely to tolerate the previous culture. Assimilation frequently presents itself as an imposition on marginalized individuals or groups, compelling them to align with the standards and anticipations of the dominant culture and this dynamic can result in feelings of alienation and the diminishment of their unique identities (Oxford Review, 2024).

The consequence of failure to assimilate is marginalization. This can be difficult for the individual, as it has both social and psychological implications. Marginalization denotes the continuation of inequality and exclusion via structural, interpersonal, and intergroup dynamics, highlighting the necessity of cultivating a sense of belonging to address these issues effectively (Carter et al., n.d., 2023). Moreover, the phenomenon of marginalization profoundly affects how individuals and groups shape their identities, often presenting a formidable challenge in maintaining both cultural and personal identity (Yolanda et al., 2000).

### *3.2. Eng's Assimilation Efforts and Failures*

The film “Americanized” depicts Eng's anxiety, marginalization, and discomfort in relation to the challenges associated with assimilating into the dominant culture. In a film review note, it is noted that the film is based on a personal experience of the director, Erica Eng<sup>2</sup>. In the opening scene, set in Oakland in 2002, Eng is depicted preparing to attend school in a manner reminiscent of a hip-hop artist. The film's opening scenes are accompanied by hip-hop music. Eng's cornrow hairstyle elicits a surprised response from her grandmother.

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<sup>2</sup>It is stated on this website ([https://www.shortoftheweek.com/2022/08/22/"Americanized"/](https://www.shortoftheweek.com/2022/08/22/)) by the film reviewer that the cinematic work is based on the experiences of the director, Erica Eng.



**Figure 1.** “Eng's grandmother was a little surprised by Eng's cornrow hairstyle”  
Erica Eng, “Americanized”, 2021



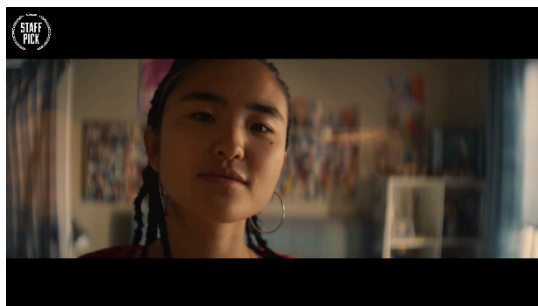
**Figure 2.** “Eng's grandmother somewhat complained about Eng's appearance”  
Erica Eng, “Americanized”, 2021

*Grandmother* : What happened to your hair?  
*Eng* : What happened to your eye?  
*Grandmother* : I fell yesterday. It's okay. Can I get you something to eat?  
*Eng* : Oh, no thanks. I gotta go.  
*Grandmother* : That's not breakfast. Let me wrap something up for you.  
*Eng* : It's fine. I am not hungry.  
*Grandmother* : You keep changing your looks. I hardly recognize you.  
(00:00:54 – 00:01:08)

The initial scene depicts Eng's grandmother, she calls her Nee Nee, visibly surprised by her granddaughter's appearance, explicitly articulating her disapproval by noting that Eng has increasingly adopted a fashion style influenced by African-American hip hop culture. Eng's grandmother appears to espouse a traditionalist perspective, perceiving Eng's lifestyle choices as incongruent with their cultural heritage. This is exemplified in the initial scene, where the grandmother offers Eng breakfast, which she declines. Instead, Eng presents her grandmother with fruit, which the latter deems an insufficient breakfast portion. This scene could be interpreted as a representation of Eng's efforts to integrate into American culture, which often prioritizes simplicity in breakfast choices. Eng is herself an Asian-American, specifically of Chinese descent.

The grandmother's surprise at Eng's cornrow hairstyle indicates that Eng did not previously adopt this style of hair adornment. Given that they reside in the same household, the grandmother is naturally aware of her granddaughter's sartorial choices and their role in her daily life. Eng's actions in altering her personal style suggest that she is attempting to establish a new identity. It seems plausible to suggest that her identity is shaped by her experiences of interacting with the African-American hip hop group at her school. This situation correlates with the concept that identity formation can be influenced by culture, mostly the most dominant one. In this case, the hip hop culture that is part of

the majority group may be perceived as a more attractive reality for Eng. Furthermore, her preference also seems logical when viewed in the context of the existing reality, which requires her to adapt in order to avoid being alienated.



**Figure 3.** “Eng’s Hip Hoper-style and Cornrow Hair Look”  
Erica Eng, “Americanized”, 2021

Eng's self-awareness demonstrates a tendency to align with the dominant cultural norms, indicating a process of negotiation. This approach to negotiation is pivotal in maintaining psychological stability and social security in the context of ethnic and cultural diversity. Significant cultural discrepancies, such as those pertaining to language, attire, and preferences, have the potential to give rise to conflict. In this scenario, the conflict represents a formidable challenge for Eng, a minority individual, to flourish and assume a role in public spaces.

In the film, Eng becomes a member of a high school basketball club, which also symbolizes her struggles to integrate with the majority of African American basketball players. The distressing psychological state is conveyed through Eng's expressions, which convey a sense of unease and discomfort. Meanwhile, her colleagues on the basketball team appear to be quite familiar with one another. It appears that Eng is not fully appreciated by her colleagues. This is evidenced by the following dialogue.

<i>AAG<sup>3</sup></i>	<i>: All I'm saying is coach better not have her anywhere near the starting at five. Her whack ass almost cost his last game. (Yeah). She gonna keep fucking up. Y'all keep riding her like that. Step just off cause last year she was bench riding too. (One of the the African American girls throwing stuff to Eng)</i>
<i>Steph</i>	<i>: Yo eight and my light.</i>
<i>One of the AAGs</i>	<i>: What? It can barely handle a ball.</i>

(00:01:55 – 00:02:14)

<sup>3</sup> The term 'AAG' is used in this context to denote African American girls. It is employed in order to refer to African American characters whose names are unknown.



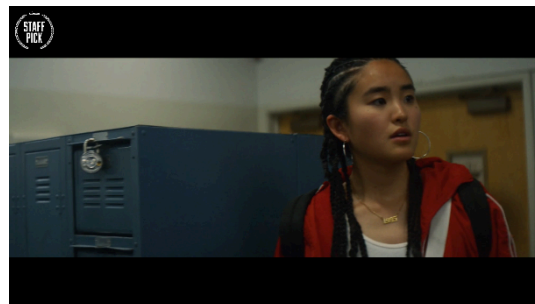
**Figure 4.** “Eng’s basketball team members, mostly dominated by African American”  
Erica Eng, “Americanized”, 2021

Despite being treated in an unfavourable manner by her peers, Eng continued to attempt to integrate herself into their social group. The incident illustrates the extent of Eng's efforts to integrate and assimilate into the social environment. Steph tried to convince Eng.

*Steph : Hey you know she’s just playing with you, right? Like she was like that with me last year. You just gotta like at her or she’ll keep fucking with you.*

*Eng : Yeah. Well, I can say shit if couch Clark keeps benching me.*

*Steph : Look, she first season with us. Get outta your head. It’s gonna be straight.*  
(00:02:36 – 00:02:50)



**Figure 5.** “Eng’s uncomfortable expression responding to her African American colleagues’ jokes”  
Erica Eng, “Americanized”, 2021

The basketball team in which she participated served as a means of reducing cultural and racial distance. Eng's efforts reflect the reflection of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which functions to denote the symbols, ideas, tastes, and preferences that can be strategically employed as resources in social interactions (Lisa Nicki, 2019). The cultural capital is used by Eng to seek assimilation into the majority group. In this case, Eng's ability to play basketball is expected to serve as a symbolic marker, indicating that Eng, as a minority, is also able to play a role similar to that of the majority.

Eng exhibited remarkable prowess in the basketball team, showcasing exceptional abilities on the court. During training sessions, she demonstrated an ability to score points. Her performance also demonstrated agility. Nevertheless, in an official match, Eng was relegated to the role of a reserve player. The prevailing atmosphere of despondency seems to envelop the scene when Eng is designated a reserve player by the coach. The situation is illustrated through the dialogue below.

*(The training session was over. Eng reached out to her friends to shake hands. They ignored her. Eng looked awkward)*

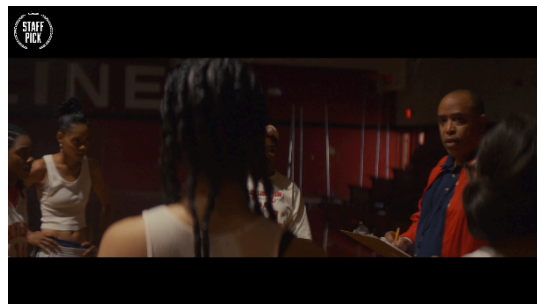
*Coach : Great Practice. Great Practice. Alright now ladies. They only thing keeping us from the playoffs is tonight's game. You know this, so stay focused and hydrate. Okay? Start at five. Davis, Fallon, Maisha, Wilkes, Steph. Steph, you're covering number five. She's fast, but you're faster. All right.*

*Steph : Yeah.*

*Coach : Hands in.*

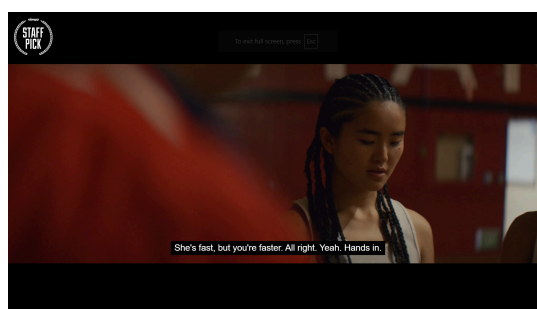
*(Despite her exemplary performance in training, Eng was not selected for the first team)*

(00:03:25 – 00:03:54)



**Figure 6.** “The coach mentioning the member’s names who will be the players for the game, implying his reluctant attitude to choose Eng”

Erica Eng, “Americanized”, 2021



**Figure 7.** “Eng’s expression of disappointment knowing her being a reserve player”

Erica Eng, “Americanized”, 2021

It is probable that Eng will experience feelings of marginalization, particularly within the context of her predominantly African-American basketball team. This occurs within the scope of the group and can be defined as an intergroup dynamic marginalization. The cultural capital exhibited by Eng is not deemed sufficient by the group.



In this film, Eng's relationship with the African-American group is depicted as a dynamic and evolving dynamic. In other words, the characters display a lack of consistency in their attitudes towards acceptance and non-acceptance. In one scene, Eng's African American colleague, Steph, extends an invitation to her to dance on the campus yard.



**Figure 8.** “Eng joining a dance with her African American basketball team”  
Erica Eng, “Americanized”, 2021

They engage in a joyful musical performance with other African-American students. At this juncture, the non-election of Eng as a core player on the basketball team and the mistreatment she receives from the African American members of the basketball team appear to be of secondary importance. This situation illustrates an implicit bias<sup>4</sup>.

It is not only racial and cultural differences that cause the marginalization of Eng. It is also most likely due to the subjective attitudes of the individuals in the film's story. In the campus' official basketball game, Eng, who was previously a reserve player, is given the opportunity by the coach to replace Steph.

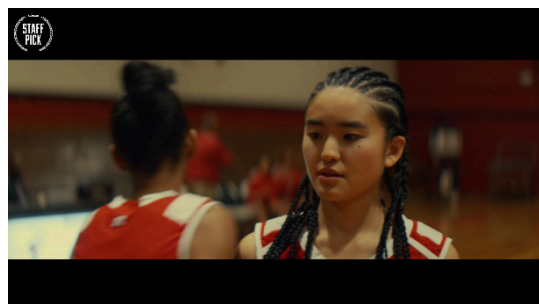
*Couch* : E (Eng)! Get up for Steph. Come on. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go.

*Eng* : Steph. (Eng attempted to indicate that he had been requested by the coach to assume the role previously held by Steph)

*Couch* : Come on. Look at the clock. Let's go.

(00:08:54 – 00:09:15)

The coach seems to see Steph's play deteriorating in the final minutes. In Steph's place, Eng seemed to go all out until she was able to score in the last minute and lead her team to victory.



<sup>4</sup> The APA defines implicit bias as "the tendency to unconsciously favor or disfavor a person or group based on certain characteristics" (Implicit Bias, n.d.).

Fig. 9. "Steph appeared disgruntled at the replacement of her role by Eng, and subsequently made physical contact with Eng's body to convey her displeasure."

Erica Eng, "Americanized", 2021

Steph showed an unhappy expression for Eng's role. As one of the dominant members of the team, Steph seemed to feel that Eng could potentially usurp and undermine her role. Meanwhile, the other basketball team members became increasingly sympathetic to Eng. They invited Eng to the celebration party, which was very different from before.

AAG : *So, what y'all about to do man? I don't know but I'm trying to wild out before a couch Carr makes us do those two a day. Yo, E! You coming?*

Eng : *Yeah, for sure.*

Steph : *When she let Gro come with us.*

(00:12:00 – 00:12:19)

In this case, Eng's ability to play basketball is seen as a factor that makes her accepted by most members of the basketball team. On the other hand, Steph sees this cultural capital as a threat to her. Marginalization in this context is thus identified as a complexity between subjectivity and cultural and racial elements.

As the film draws to a close, Eng finds herself in a state of contention with Steph. The conflict arises from Steph's perception of offense caused by Eng's assertion. Eng appears to be attempting to adapt to the basketball team's use of vulgar and bullying language.

Tori : *Like y'all be taking your ride, right?*

Steph : *Nah, y'all still owe me gas money from the last time driving me out broke asses.*

Tori : *Ah so we broke right? Like how you let number five break your ankles. All African American girls including Eng laughing at Tori's joke.*

AAG : *No. I wasn't number five, right Steph? it was a ghost that meant to push you out the way like Casper must be out there.*

Eng : *(Eng mocked Steph) Poor a strong gas breeze.*

AAG : *(All laughing). Oh, she got drunk!*

Steph : *What'd you say? (expressing anger at Eng)*

(00:12:22 - 00:12:57)

Prior to this, Steph herself had already demonstrated to Eng that the language they used was intended as humor and did not require serious consideration. In this context, Eng's efforts to adopt the language style of the African-American basketball team were not fully accepted. Steph, who was experiencing psychological distress, found Eng's remarks inappropriate. It is reasonable to conclude that her irritation is a normal response to such circumstances. However, her actions become problematic when only Eng is singled out, while the other African-American members of the basketball team are not addressed. This suggests that Eng's position is still perceived as that of an outsider who has been unable to fully integrate into the group. This indicates a failure of assimilation and marginalization as depicted by Eng.

### *3.3. Eng being Rejected in Asian-American Community*

Eng's difficulties in integrating with the majority have resulted in the emergence of other challenges that are equally arduous. From the perspective of the Asian-American community, Eng was perceived

as having undergone an excessive degree of Americanization. Eng's physical appearance, preferences, and communicative style were perceived as incongruous with the expectations of the Asian-American community in the collage. Eng's identity appears to be ambiguous when viewed from the perspective of two distinct communities. From the perspective of the African-American group, Eng is perceived as an outsider, whereas from the viewpoint of the Asian American group, she is regarded as being excessively African-American in her characteristics. This condition is exemplified in the following scene.

*(Denise, a Chinese American, whispered to her friends as Eng entered the room.)*

*Denise : What does she think? She's a Black girl now?*

*(The Asian American students joked with each other in a casual manner. There is one character who is eating Chinese food.)*

*Eng : What's the smell?*

*AMS : Oh, it's just my mom made it for dinner last night?*

*(Eng felt guilty about the question and quickly clarified.)*

*Eng : Oh no it looks um I didn't mean it like.*

*Denise : So, do you know it's rude to talk about other people's food like that?*

*Eng : I didn't mean it.*

*Denise : Does your family even know how to cook Chinese food? (said with an annoyed facial expression)*

*(Denise and a female Chinese American student are engaged in a conversation in a language that Eng is unable to comprehend, which may be Mandarin.)*

(00:05:00 – 00:06:15)



**Figure 9.** “Denise and other Asian American collages whispering about Eng's fashion style.”  
Erica Eng, “Americanized”, 2021

The disparity in cultural identity plays a pivotal role in the conflict between Eng and the Asian-American group. Eng's racial identity, which is seen as part of the group, does not fully align with expectations. This is because Eng is perceived to no longer understand and practice Chinese-American culture and traditions. These expectations include several aspects of Chinese-American culture, namely (1) fashion, (2) language, and (3) food tastes. All of these are no longer well reflected in Eng. As a result, Eng is no longer considered part of Asian America. Eng's continued association with the Asian- American community at school demonstrates her ongoing embrace of the culture, albeit to a limited extent. Her existence in two cultural contexts has compelled her to navigate a complex identity negotiation. It is not feasible for her to fully inhabit one context

exclusively, as doing so may result in further marginalisation. In this case, cultural adjustment is essential for achieving a harmonious integration of her diverse identities.

#### **4. Conclusions**

By the end of the film, it is evident that Eng's efforts to negotiate her identity have not yet been fully resolved. She remains an outsider within the African American group at her school. Furthermore, her efforts to integrate into the Asian-American community illustrate a similar phenomenon, whereby she is perceived as more Americanized. The process of negotiating racial and cultural differences is inherently challenging. In the context of adolescence, personal issues between young people can complicate the process of social integration between different racial and cultural groups, potentially exacerbating existing challenges. The reasons for Eng's inability to integrate into the African-American group are manifold. Firstly, the internal solidarity of the African-American group in the film is relatively strong and exclusive. In such circumstances, Eng, as a relatively recent arrival, will undoubtedly encounter significant difficulties in integrating into the long-established solidarity. Secondly, Eng's cultural capital, namely her ability to adapt to fashion, language style, and basketball, has the potential to cause complications with personal issues. One of the African-American characters, Steph, feels her role is threatened because of Eng's contribution to her basketball team. Thirdly, the environment is not conducive to the advancement of Eng's efforts. The film depicts numerous instances wherein Eng, as a minority, encounters significant challenges in establishing parity with the majority. The prevalence of abusive and bullying language further exacerbates her marginalization. Eng's endeavors to integrate and assimilate into the dominant culture result in a marginalized position, albeit to a relatively minor extent. The scene's conclusion portrays Eng in a state of distress, being comforted by her grandmother. This could be interpreted as symbolizing that her immediate familial environment offers a more secure haven than the external world.

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