

**CHINESE IMMIGRANT'S SEARCHING FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY  
IN LIAN GOUW'S *ONLY A GIRL***

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores “Chinese Immigrant's Searching for Cultural Identity in Lian Gouw’s *Only a Girl*”. It aims to discuss how a Chinese girl searches for cultural identity, meanwhile the objectives of the study are the effort to search cultural identity, the problems, and the impacts of searching cultural identity. It uses a qualitative method as the research design and sociological approach as a literary approach. The result shows that Jenny coming from a Chinese immigrant family searches her cultural identity due to her different cultural identity she has. She raised in a Dutch culture is given a western name and introduced to western culture. The change of political situation after the post-independence period makes her difficult in searching cultural identity. She gets difficulties in navigating cultural identity. As she is unaccustomed to use the Indonesian culture, she encounters many challenges that generate a cultural conflict to adapt a new cultural identity. As a result, she changes her worldview and life decision. The findings of this study indicate that the efforts of searching and adapting cultural identity come from her family, such as giving a western name, and introducing a western culture. But the change of political situation, she gets difficulties in assimilating the Dutch culture. She changes her worldview and life decision by going to America to study a Veterinarian. Therefore, the cultural identity is socially constructed through conflicts.

**Keywords:** *Chinese immigrant, the search for cultural identity, cultural conflict*

**A. INTRODUCTION**

Every individual as a social being needs the presence of others to relate to and collaborate with other humans. In this context, a human tends to interact with individuals coming from the same identity that carries a relationship of difference and similarity. The conception of self-identity is essential to the individual’s understanding in the environment and relation to the society. With a comprehension of identity, one can behave as a social being to anticipate what others expect of him and evaluate his own actions accordingly as he interacts with others. An individual who is aware of himself is capable of “influencing his own development as a person” (May, 1993: 73).

When a person has something in common with other members of a group, a relationship of similarity in identity develops. An essential aspect of modern-day society is cultural identity. It includes values, beliefs, customs, and histories, which shape the way people think, behave, and view the world. It becomes crucial

in forming a sense of self and helps individuals understand how they relate to others and the world around them (Wilson, 2023: 36). It can be gained in various ways, such as language, symbols, values, norms, and relationships. As a fluid process that changes over time, it is influenced by different social, cultural, and historical experiences. The influence of different cultures may cause confusion to determine the cultural identity. Cultural influences and identities become important depending on context, and when an aspect of cultural identity is threatened or misunderstood, it may become relatively more important than other cultural identities, and this fixed, narrow identity may become the focus of stereotyping, negative projection, and conflict (LeBaron, 2003: 56).

The issue of cultural identity has been further concerned by some writers. One of the writers who concerns with cultural identity is Lian Gouw. Through the power of literature, then Lian Gouw, a native of Indonesia, has explored it extensively. She wants to use her work, *Only a Girl*, as a means to convey her ideas dealing with identity. She tries to search for Chinese immigrant's cultural identity in a changing world. It offers insights into the challenges of being an immigrant in a new country, the struggle of Chinese immigrant when trying to find the place in a society that may not fully accept or understand their cultural heritage.

The novel depicts the struggles of the main character, Jenny, a young woman of Chinese generation who is raised in the West. She feels that she does not belong to Indonesia so she finds herself difficulty in the newly independent Indonesian state where Dutch culture is no longer revered. She faces conflicts between her Chinese heritage and the expectations of the westernized society she lives in. Through her experiences, the novel highlights the complexities of cultural identity and the challenges of reconciling different cultural values and traditions. This study will focus on how the searching of cultural identity for the Chinese immigrants is shaped and its impact on individual behaviors, beliefs, values, and intercultural interactions and relations. By examining the cultural identity, this study aims to explore the concepts of cultural identity by providing a deeper understanding of cultural identity by examining its dimensions, and various manifestations across diverse cultural contexts.

## **B. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

A conception of identity derives from social interaction with others. The individual learns to comprehend his self-identity through interactions with others to evaluate his own actions accordingly. It leads an individual to perception of his self-identity that undergoes continuous change. Interacting with others might bring to alter the identity. Seeking approval and receiving disapproval might change the behavior in certain ways. Consequently, self-identity always adjusts to the expectation of others (Wahyono, 2011: 1). It is "a process learned through association with other people" (Dressler, 1996: 228) based on culture and values within society.

Cultural identity refers to collective identities shaped by social, cultural, and historical aspects as well as personal identities. It shows an individual or a group, such as beliefs, personality traits, appearance, and/or expressions (Berezin, 2010). It indicates the common norms, values, behaviors, and beliefs that define a group

of people, who are often united by nationality, religion, or ethnicity. It shapes people's perceptions of who they are and where they fit in the world, which influences their behavior, social interactions and personalities. Hall states that cultural identity is not a fixed or essential concept, but rather a complex and dynamic formation. It is not a matter of being, but a continuous process of becoming and belonging, which is as much about the future as it is about the past (Hall in Harman, 2016: 44).

Cultural identity is considered significant as it shapes an individual's interpretation of the world and the response. A person's cultural identity is dynamic and constantly changing as it is based on the social environment at all times of the lifetime. When individuals or groups' cultural practices, beliefs, or values clash with those of another culture, it leads to tension, misunderstanding, or conflict (LeBaron, 2003: 58). In a certain situations this conflict are inter-group relations, and foreign affairs. As it promotes cultural fluency, understanding, and respect, addressing cultural identity, it is essential to manage and resolve it in an effective manner. Hall emphasizes that cultural identity is a place where similarities and contrasts coexist and is a subject of conflict, negotiation, and interpretation. He contends that cultural identity is continually contested and reinvented rather than being set in stone. As it emphasizes the dynamic and diverse nature of cultural identities, which can result in conflicts and significant contrasts between cultures, this perspective is consistent with the concept of cultural identity conflict (Hall & Du Gay, 1996: 88).

In order to successfully handle and manage conflicts caused by cultural identities, it is necessary to have a framework for recognizing the complicated nature of cultural identities. Hall's theory provides insights into the root causes of cultural identity conflict and the necessity of strategies that foster mutual respect, understanding, and communication among diverse cultures by acknowledging the fluidity and complexity of cultural identities. Therefore, by emphasizing the dynamic character of cultural identities and the continuous effort to define and negotiate them, Hall's theory enhances our knowledge of cultural identity conflict. In conducting the study, the cultural identity conflict theory helps us understand how conflicts tied to cultural identity shape an individual's sense of self. It explores the complexities of these clashes, revealing their impact on attitudes and behaviors. This theory is valuable for examining not only personal experiences but also how cultural identity conflicts influence interactions within the broader society. It highlights their effects on socialization, influencing how individuals connect with and are accepted by the larger community.

### **C. RESEARCH METHOD**

In analyzing *Only a Girl* by Lian Gouw, the study uses descriptive qualitative research method which attempts to describe everything, regardless of whether it directly or indirectly relates to the research problem (Lambert, 2013: 16). In addition, Patricia Leavy (2017: 9) states that qualitative research is used when a researcher's primary objective is to explore, describe, or explain. Therefore, based on the above explanation, this study uses a descriptive qualitative research method as the purpose of this study is to discover, explore, understand, describe and

investigate the ways in which individuals navigate and negotiate their and cultural identities, and how these identity conflicts shape their experiences and opportunities in life. Furthermore, this study uses the sociological approach because it deals with the search for cultural identity.

In doing so, Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity is applied in this study to help to discover the result expected. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity in literature allows for the deconstruction and reconstruction of particular identity, emphasizing the constant transformation and negotiation of it (Barstad, Knutsen, & Vestli, 2019: 32). The data of this study are a novel entitled *Only a Girl* by Lian Gouw. It is published in 2009, having 295 pages. In obtaining the data, the data are read, classified, and analyzed.

## **D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Effort to Search for Cultural Identity**

#### **1. Giving a Western Name**

Jenny comes from a Chinese family that upholds tradition. She lives in Indonesia at that time of Dutch colonization. Her birth name given by her grandmother is Siu Yin. She is enrolled in a Dutch school in the hope that she will be easier to get along with and have a higher social status. The closeness of her family to officials at that time is also one of the factors that make her easier to enter the Dutch social sphere. She receives the Dutch mindset and education. Her mother wants her to have a Dutch name, Jenny, so that it will be easier for her to blend in with society. It can be seen in the following quotation:

Caroline suggested, "Let's give Siu Yin a Dutch calling name." Po Han stroked the baby's fist. "What would such a little girl do with so many names?" "It will be easier for her when she goes to school, and it will be a name we chose for her." (Gouw, 2009: 54).

Given the Dutch name, she will be easier to have interaction with Dutch people than with Chinese or Indonesians. The Dutch is regarded as having a higher social rank than Chinese and Indonesians. A place in an upper social class is the reason of having a Dutch name that allows her to attend Dutch schools and eventually get employment in the colonial government. It seems that giving her a Dutch name is motivated by the desire to facilitate her to have social interactions and integration within the Dutch community. By assigning a Dutch name, it will provide her certain advantages, particularly in the social hierarchy and opportunities available within the context of Dutch colonial society. The Dutch in a societal hierarchy places a higher social rank than the Chinese and Indonesians as the name often carries cultural and social connotations.

Furthermore, having a Dutch name can potentially elevate her social status, placing her in an upper social class within the colonial society. This social advantage may extend to various aspects of her life, such as education and employment opportunities. For instance, being able to attend Dutch schools and eventually securing employment in the colonial government suggests that having a Dutch name can open doors to specific privileges and pathways that might be more accessible to individuals associated with the dominant European culture. By aligning herself with the Dutch culture through her name and presumably adapting

to their customs, Jenny may find it easier to navigate and succeed in the colonial society. The assimilation into the Dutch community may lead to gain a better social prospects.

## 2. Introducing Western Culture

She is not only given a Dutch name but also actively introduced Dutch culture into their daily lives. One notable culture is the habit of reading stories before going to bed. This habit is a cultural tradition that aims to entertain and potentially instill certain values, morals, or cultural nuances through storytelling. By exposing her to Dutch bedtime stories, she can immerse the cultural narratives and perspectives of the Dutch people that often carry cultural and societal values. Incorporating this tradition can shape her worldview and understanding of the world in a manner aligned with Dutch culture as it is portrayed in the following quotation:

At bedtime, Eddie read Jenny stories. The family had adopted the Dutch habit of reading for pleasure. Over the years Chip and Ting had filled the shelves of the tall bookcases in the library. (Gouw, 2009: 75)

Moreover, her mother extends her efforts beyond storytelling by providing Dutch meal menus to her. Providing Dutch meals at home is a way of introducing her to the culinary aspects of Dutch culture. Meals are an integral part of cultural identity, and by incorporating Dutch dishes into their daily routine, her mother exposes her to the flavors, ingredients, and dining habits associated with Dutch cuisine. This serves as a means of cultural integration so it will contribute to shape her preferences and habits from an early age. As a result, she will adopt the Dutch way of life from an early age.

“Do you mind having a Dutch meal mid-week and on Sundays?” Caroline searched Po Han’s face. “I’ll eat what comes to the table,” Po Han smiled.

“Ocho usually cooks Chinese or Malay food. I don’t think she’s ever had a real Dutch meal.” He paused and laughed. “She’ll find out one is never too old for new experiences.” (Gouw, 2009: 26)

The overall intention behind these efforts is likely to encourage her to grow up adopting the Dutch way of life and thinking. Her mother believes that by instilling these cultural practices early, she will naturally incorporate with the Dutch customs, values, and perspectives into her identity. The hope is that this early exposure will contribute to her seamless integration into Dutch society, facilitating her social interactions and acceptance within the cultural context in which she is being raised.

Carolien pursed her lips. She had no intentions of teaching her daughter subordinate behavior or the traditional reverence for males. “I’ll make sure,” she said, “that Jenny grows up to be independent.” (Gouw, 2009: 75).

Her mother raises her in a way that is different from traditional Chinese culture. A Chinese girl should take care of the cooking, household work, and respect the men. However, her mother deliberately avoids these traditional culture for her. She does not teach her to follow the traditional roles. She encourages her to be more independent and does not limit her to stereotypical gender roles. She wants her to have a broader range of skills interactions and opportunities. In addition, her mother sends her to the Dutch school with the purpose that she will grow up to be a successful and professional woman. She can interact and socialize with her Dutch

friends and teachers. She teaches her daughter the Dutch way of life and values. It is shown in the following quotation:

“Do you think we’re going to have trouble enrolling Jenny in kindergarten at the Oranje School?” she asked. “She’ll be five in August.” Carolien wanted Jenny to have a prominent place in society, and a Dutch education was the first step... “School agreed with Jenny and her teachers liked her ... She spent most of recess watching the boys play tackle ball ... ‘C’mon, why aren’t you playing?’ Tim de Vries yelled.’ From that day on Jenny joined their daily tackle-ball games after school track practice” (Gouw, 2009: 121).

In fact, Jenny's interactions with the Dutch culture influence her to form a partially Dutch personality. Hall states that identity formation emphasizes the complex interaction between cultural, environmental, and social factors in shaping individual and collective identities (Hall & Du Gay, 1996: 24). Her environment shapes her to become what she would become. Her environment shapes who she is. She has always been exposed by the Dutch, including its principles, culture, and people. It seems that her Dutch surroundings influence her habits, traditions, and personalities.

Since she was born in the Chinese family in the middle of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, she has been influenced by many languages. She is influenced by her grandmother to focus on the Chinese culture and language, meanwhile her mother asks her to learn the Dutch culture and language since her mother thinks it is more modern language than the Chinese. She goes to one of the best Dutch schools in Indonesia. Her problem comes when the school uses Indonesian language instead of Dutch language. She is not permitted to speak about Dutch in class. She becomes worried as Indonesian language is not used in her family. She doubts her ability to learn anything if she is not allowed to speak Dutch. Her inability to speak the local language will make her challenging to adapt to new life in Indonesia.

However, the use of the many languages during her lifetime have affecting her. She becomes curious to quest for what is supposed to be her identity. She struggles to speak Indonesian because she used to speak Dutch language rather than Indonesian.

“Jenny, are you going to answer my question?” Sardjono tapped on her desk with the chalk. When she remained silent, he persisted, “How would you support the process, Jenny?” Students shifted in their seats. Paper rustled. Out of the corner of her eye, Jenny saw a few hands go up. She scowled at the classmates with hands in the air. “I won’t” she said (Gouw, 2009: 280).

Jenny's environment influences her a Dutch-like way of speaking. However, society forces her to step outside of her comfort zone by asking her speak Indonesian. Nonetheless, Mr. Sardjono, an Indonesian language instructor, feels compelled to disregard his students' lack of Indonesian language proficiency. He has the enthusiasm of high nationalism, after Indonesia's independence, to display the patriotism. Because she is not sure if the native or indigenous teacher could instruct her, Jenny cannot have much respect for Mr. Sardjono. She refuses to use Indonesian language because it is the language of the the lowest class, or *pribumi*. She is unable to socialize with her native and Chinese friends. Her friends speak

Mandarin, Malay or Indonesian, but she only speaks Dutch. As a result, she feels strange in her own environment.

Grace and Theresa chose adjacent seats a few rows behind Jenny. Through the rustle and shuffles of students settling into their seats, Jenny overheard the girls' whispers. They spoke Malay with each other, but she could make out what they were saying. "She's got a boy's haircut." Theresa giggled. "Isn't her dress weird?" Grace whispered into her notebook. "It isn't a dress, she's wearing pants. Her mother probably doesn't know how to sew dresses." "She might as well be a boy." (Gouw, 2009: 182).

### **The Problems of Searching for Cultural Identity**

As Jenny has much been influenced by the Dutch culture since her birth, she becomes more and more like a Dutch person rather than Chinese. From what she has learned that the Dutch is at the top hierarchy and Chinese is next hierarchy, and Indonesian/Malay is considered as a lower class. She becomes so sure that she belongs to the upper class of the race. She becomes afraid of the Japanese people who raid and kidnap or even kill her family as a part of upper class. She becomes panic about the news that the Japanese and Germany make an alliance. So she and her family begin creating a shelter when the Japanese attacks them.

"The Japanese have an alliance with Germany—we could be involved any time now. We've got to get ready. Fill up the water containers and make sure we have food in the house. Have a supply of candles, matches, and flashlights on hand. I've got to go back to my office. We have to remove some important documents." He looked at Nanna, "I've ordered Mundi to begin digging a bomb shelter." Chip rushed out of the room. (Gouw, 2009: 86)

As the Japanese surrender to the allied forces after the United States bombed Hiroshima on August 6 and Nagasaki on August 9, Jenny feels relieved that somehow Chip's death is avenged. Her family doesn't feel scared anymore and can freely do whatever they want. This makes her family feel safe when going outside, but she still has the problem of *inlanders* in her path. She has a mixture of relief, and uncertainty She realizes everything will change drastically in her environment. She starts to get a confusion between where she should be in, the Dutch, or Chinese. It has resulted in significant changes of her behavior. She no longer engages in impulsive activities such as changing into shorts immediately upon returning home, going on wild bike rides, or spending excessive time in the garden engaging in adventurous activities.

As a result of this transformation, she is no longer perceived as a misfit in Chinese society. It indicates a shift towards more grounded and socially accepted behaviors, As Indonesia gains its independence, the Indonesian Revolution brings some changes. The Dutch school is turned into an Indonesian one. The Indonesian language and history are added to the school curriculum. The teacher and the students are mostly *inlanders*. The student are thought all about Indonesian, and there's no more Dutch culture anymore. She feels unsure and doubtful because the teachers are the *inlanders* who are considered as low-class society. She is frustrated that she has to listen to what the *inlanders* had to say.

Hans Overbeek, the rector, announced in his opening address that the school had added Indonesian language and history to its curriculum. "After all, it's only normal that the citizens of a country should know that country's language and history."... She had never had an inlander as a teacher and was doubtful that he had anything to teach her.(Gouw, 2009: 180)

She has skeptical opinion as the inlanders are considered peasants and servants, She begins to doubt it. Her feeling toward Indonesian people is shaped by the historical and cultural point of view. Her western upbringing puts her at a disadvantage where Dutch culture is no longer revered. She feels anxious. There is a mixture of disbelief, curiosity, and even discontent in her feeling when she discovers that names should be changed as a result of colonial influences. Understanding the impact on individuals, She takes into consideration her particular connection to identity and heritage, which may be complex and diverse. For example when she has to bring her birth certificate because as an Indonesian and Chinese citizen have a different name on their birth certificate, she doesn't believe her teacher. After asking her grandmother, who keeps her birth certificate, she still can't believe that she has two names in her birth certificate.

To accommodate the Dutch, her parents often changed the name for their child to a Dutch call-name. If they do not do, it will take too much effort for a Dutchman to pronounce or remember her authentic name. It seems that The Dutch practices colonialism by changing the names of Chinese and Indonesian children to Dutch call-names to accommodate the Dutch. This practice results in the birth certificate name being different from the name the child used.

### **The Impacts of Searching for Cultural Identity**

As she gets difficulties in navigating cultural differences in a multicultural society as well as the complexity involved in identity development, she experiences cultural identity conflict. Her self-discovery journey and attempts to balance her Dutch and Chinese identities provide valuable insights on the significance of embracing multiculturalism and the identity development process. The impacts of her searching of cultural identity are the changes of her worldview and her life decision.

Her perspective on the world, shaped by her childhood that is closed to the Dutch government, greatly influences her cultural identity conflict. Her identity struggle becomes worse by the revelation of her Chinese origin and the ensuing cultural conflicts she faces as Indonesia gets independence and the Dutch culture goes away. Her upbringing in the Dutch culture and her strong ties to the Dutch government have greatly influenced on her identity. The Dutch culture becomes less prevalent, and her family's status in society becomes dropped. She experiences an identity crisis as a result of her altered social standing and altered cultural power structures. Jenny starts to develop a different viewpoint on locals as a result of experiencing a new environment or culture. Her original name, a Chinese name, is Lee Siu Yin but at the time her well known name, a Dutch name is Jenny Lee. The Indonesian and Chinese had changed their names to make room for the Dutch.

Jenny starts to be doubtful. She thinks of herself as having a good social status among her Dutch friends and colleagues. She is aware that her real name, Siu Yin does not match with her environment as the Chinese people generally belong to the

middle class in society. As a result she feels inferior since her surroundings and identity has changed. She begins to embrace multiculturalism. She struggles to adjust the language barriers, the new rules of school, and new environment. It seems that she becomes confused with her current actual identity.

As she gets confused of her current identity, the path she takes is going to America as a Veterinarian. She likes to work in the zoo even though everyone will think that her choice is weird. To be a veterinarian she might not only have to study abroad, but also have to live there. Here, people generally don't attach much thought to animal welfare.

"I'd like to be a veterinarian." She peered at Po Han's face over the rim of her teacup. "I could work in the zoo." Po Han took a sip of his tea. "But everyone thinks I'm weird. Dad..." Jenny hesitated. "Should I look into scholarships? Do you think I should go to university abroad?" For a moment they sat quietly. Po Han pensively broke the silence. "If you want to be a veterinarian you might not only have to study abroad, you might also have to live there. Here, people generally don't attach much thought to animal welfare." (Gouw, 2009: 268)

She decides to be a veterinarian because she needs to fight against her mother's will to become a lawyer. She wants to dedicate her life to be a great veterinarian. On the other hand, her mother doesn't agree her decision to be a veterinarian as she will be difficult to make a living. As a result, her mother does not want to pay for her college tuition so she looks for a scholarship for attending veterinarian college. After her high-school graduation, she immediately takes a flight to America to become veterinarian, even though she has to leave her family and her mother. She finally knows what she wants to do in the future. Her resolve to pursue a career as a veterinarian is a proof of her special passion for animal care. She questions herself regarding the financial sustainability and social standing of her preferred professional path, but she has a strong belief in her desire. She considers that her option emphasizes the value of pursuing her passion despite outside circumstances.

In short, her uncertainty gives way to a revelation on her future goals. She expresses her wish to become a veterinarian and takes the challenges of doing her current situation. The possible difficulties makes her wonder if her dream will really come true. Her optimism and realism to face of her future goals is reflected in her enthusiasm, and willingness to investigate possible paths.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that Jenny's quest for cultural identity is rooted in the intricate layers of her background. Her family's immigrant origins from China establishes themselves in Indonesia during a challenging period marked by Dutch colonization. Her parents uphold a strong connection to Chinese customs and traditions. Her mother receives a Dutch education due to her family's close ties with influential figures at similar to her own. This cultural richness becomes a significant part in shaping her experiences and worldview.

Additionally, she has some challenges including the problems with the language and how her friends and teachers treat her at school after Indonesia becomes independent. She is in a new and completely unknown place. It becomes hard for her to fit in and understand this new way of life. The tension between her old family teachings and the new rules in society makes her complicated. The clash between the old and the new, mixed with the changing political situation, creates a complicated and tough experience.

Jenny's worldview, shaped by the complex interplay of her Chinese heritage, Dutch upbringing, and the challenges faced in her social interactions, becomes a lens through which she perceives the world. These conflicts act as powerful forces that influence her perspectives, shaping her understanding of self and others. The clash between her cultural background and the expectations of her surroundings creates a dynamic tension that forces Jenny to navigate an intricate path of identity formation.

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