

**But What in the World Is an Asian American?
Culture, Class and Invented Traditions in
Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land***

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Abstract

Through a reading of Gish Jen's 1996 novel, *Mona in the Promised Land*, this essay argues for the importance of considering socioeconomic class in reading representations of ethnicity in Asian American literature. Set in upstate New York in the late 1960s, *Mona* is typically read as a story about the fluidity of American ethnicity: the protagonist Mona Chang, the American-born daughter of immigrant restaurant owners, invents her ethnicity by converting to Judaism, the religion of her peers. Mona and her friends also befriend African-Americans and experiment with cross-race dating and communal living. I argue, however, that the family conflicts surrounding Mona's conversion are at heart about class. Her parents, originally from wealthy families in pre-1949 Shanghai, put pressure on their children to be high-achieving "model minorities," or "New Jews," in order to recover their lost class privileges. They reject "people of color" rhetoric because it would align them with lower-class blacks and Latinos. Mona's conversion to an activist variety of Reform Judaism represents an attempt to reconcile her idealistic desire for social change with her filial desire to improve her family's standing. As a comedy, *Mona's* story has a conservative happy ending in which "multicultural" social threats are contained and class structure—closely intertwined with racial order—is re-

stored.

Key Words: Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, Asian American, ethnicity, class