

Concept/Vocabulary Analysis of

AMERICAN BORN CHINESE

First Edition

By Gene Luen Yang

Organizational Patterns:

American Born Chinese is a graphic novel written along three different story lines: a legendary myth of the Monkey King; a boy named Jin Wang who is trying to balance his family's culture and the culture in which he lives; and an obnoxiously stereotyped Chinese man who comes to visit his cousin in America. The novel switches between these three seemingly unrelated accounts, until the end when they all culminate in one great meaning. Each segment of these varying stories consists of about 20-30 pages, with transitions indicated by a representative red stamped Chinese seal, including the image of a screaming monkey, a concerned boy, and a snickering stereotyped Chinese man. Because this book is a graphic novel, it is written in dialogue, with few interjectory narrations. Also, a significant element to understanding this text is done by interpreting the coordinating images.

Issues related to this Study of Literature

THEME

Identity- Jin Wang is torn between two cultures: the Chinese culture that his parents know so well, and the culture of the students he interacts with at school. He finds himself in many awkward situations because of what he has been taught. For example, Jin goes on a date with a pretty American girl named Amelia. Deodorant is not a part of the Chinese culture that he grew up with. Trying to salvage himself from the sweaty stink of riding his bike, he put powdered soap under his arms, which bubbled all over his date when he tried to put his arm around her. Luckily, it wasn't evident that she noticed. When he comes to accept who he is, he finds he has greater confidence and the ability to restore damaged relationships.

Identity is also a major theme in the story of the Monkey King. He is rejected by all of the other deities because of the way he looks. They are all in human form, while he is a monkey. Although he is more than qualified to be among them, they reject him. This rejection leads him to mastering twelve major disciplines of kung-fu, enabling him to change his form to be more human-like. There is a scene where he argues with Tze-yo-tzuh, his creator, over whether or not he is a monkey (69). As the Monkey King tries to escape this truth by flying to the edges of the universe, he finds that he is destined to be a

monkey. His anger at this conclusion caused Tze-yo-tzuh to bury him under a pile of rocks where he remained for 500 years (84), until he recognizes and takes his true form, making him small enough to escape the rocks (149-150). It teaches acceptance of identity, along with the power that comes from working with what one has.

Stereotyping- There are many examples of the danger of stereotyping in *American Born Chinese*. A very obvious example is the story of Chin-kee. As the reader looks at him, especially outside of context, the reader can see and analyze the different ways he is stereotyped. Chin-kee's name, itself, denotes a derogatory term. Also, his two large teeth and closed eyes, yellow skin, and long braid are just the physical elements. In addition to these, he possesses different abrasive, uncivilized qualities that have historically been ascribed to Chinese people. The danger of viewing these stereotypes is seen in the stark contrast between this imagined character and Jin Wang, who, despite some cultural differences, still possesses a common set of morals and values with the rest of his classmates. In the end, however, we learn that Danny's contempt toward Chin-kee is really Jin Wang's contempt toward his own culture, as he has begun to believe that those stereotypes may be real.

Coming of Age- This graphic novel can be viewed as a bildungsroman or coming of age story. Jin Wang has to find himself and where he hangs in the balance between the two different cultures. The awkwardness of this process is illustrated when he moves from Chinatown to his new elementary school, with "the scent of [his] old home still lingering in [his] clothes" (30). The teacher introduces him to the class: "Class, I'd like us all to give a big Mayflower Elementary welcome to your new friend and classmate Jing Jang." He corrects her: "Jin Wang." The contrast between the Mayflower Elementary School and the uniqueness of Jin Wang's culture set the stage for other contrasting elements of Chinese culture and mainstream Americanism. He is not always understood, and often singled out because he is different. He has to make decisions and sacrifices based on what is really important to him, at times sacrificing the wrong things. This novel shows the readers Jin Wang's process of making this decision, showing him as he grows and matures.

SETTING

The story of the Monkey King takes place between heaven and the fictional Flower-Fruit Mountain where he was born out of a rock, and monkeys from all over the world flock to him as his disciples.

The stories of both Jin Wang and Chin-kee take place at Oliphant High School, a fictional American school named by the author because of an offensive cartoon that was written during the Chinese spy-plane Crisis. In an interview with Kristy Valenti, Yang further explains:

“VALENTI: I also noticed that you mention Oliphant High School [in *American Born Chinese*].

YANG: That was a conscious plant. That was actually a reference to a strip that Pat Oliphant did during the Chinese spy-plane crisis. He drew this cartoon where

he had Uncle Sam visiting this Chinese restaurant, and the restaurant owner was this horrible, horrible stereotype. I actually quote a couple of lines from that strip word-for-word in *American Born Chinese*. The spelling of "Amellica" when Chin-Kee comes on the scene was directly from that strip, and then when Chin-Kee eats lunch in another scene, he eats cat gizzards with crispy-fried noodles. That was a direct quote from the Pat Oliphant strip, too. I was pissed off about the strip so I wanted to put it in the comic book."

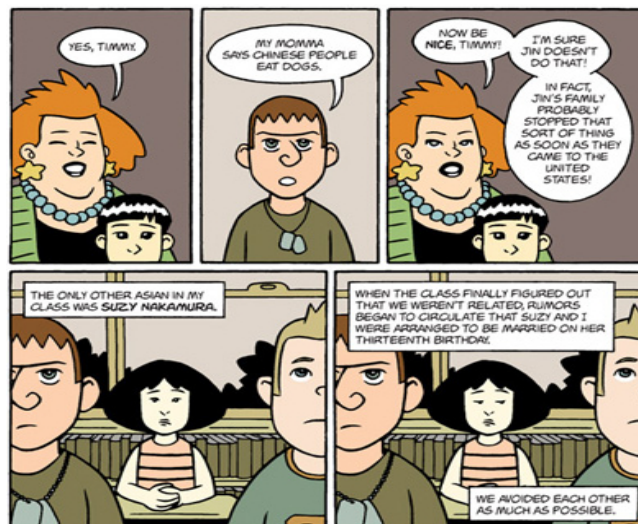
(http://tcj.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=666&Itemid=48).

GENRE

Genre will be important to introduce before reading *American Born Chinese*. This can be categorized as a graphic novel. Many of the students will be familiar with comic strips, as well as novels, teach them that this is a combination. It is important to help the students recognize what needs to happen to understand any text, regardless of genre, and then help them learn how to interpret this text. Part of the text includes the images that accompany the words.

DIALOGUE

Oftentimes, books are written in "he said," "she said," form. This is dialogue. In *American Born Chinese* it is different: there are no quotations, but dialogue bubbles. It will be important to show the students how the dialogues are read to help them read it in order, emphasizing that it is the same as any other type of novel: top to bottom, left to right.



Comment [SG1]: Excellent. There are some good connections to this form of writing on NCTE's READWRITETHINK site.

IRONY (VERBAL AND SITUATIONAL)

In the story of the Monkey King, we see an ironic reversal between the monkey's expectation and fulfillment. After having been kicked out of a party with the deities in heaven because of his monkey-nature, the Monkey King reflects: "When he entered his royal chamber, the thick smell of monkey fur greeted him. He'd never noticed it before. He stayed awake for the rest of the night thinking of ways to get rid of it" (20). The reader can recognize his erroneous way of thinking (verbal irony), but this becomes the ultimate goal of the Monkey King: something he believes is rational. He seeks to be powerful and integrated with the deities in heaven, but finds himself under a pile of rocks

in his more human form (situational irony). Following the other stories, the theme of identity gives the reader additional knowledge that the characters of the story are not privy to.

As all three stories develop, their connection becomes more obvious. Another example of irony is found at the end of the novel, when all the stories come together, finding themselves closely interconnected.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

Despite the humor and exaggerated nature of this book, the issues at hand are real. They demonstrate prominent problems found not only in schools, but also in all of society today. The question of how we view one another, despite race, gender, accomplishments, or differences. The story of Jin Wang is not as far from reality as Students will be able to relate to *American Born Chinese* in several ways.

Ethnicity or differences- How do we view people of different ethnic backgrounds? What do we actually know about them? How do we react to those differences? Do we make fun of them? Are we afraid of differences? When else in history have people been afraid of differences? How has it affected the lives of those who are “different”? Have you ever been the one who is different?

Friendship and loyalty is an important topic in this book as well. Wei-chen Sun moves to Jin Wang’s elementary school, and after a struggle, they become friends. The friendship is ruined, however, as Jin Wang tries to become more American. The students could discuss the limits of loyalty and friendship. What is required to have a strong friendship?

This book also provides opportunities to begin to share and understand different cultures. Other topics that could be discussed with the students are loneliness, individuality, stereotypes within the context of school, and outside of the school context.

Vocabulary Issues

Because this book is written in dialogue of students ranging from elementary school to high school, the vocabulary is not very difficult to understand. If there are any words that the students don’t understand, they are easy to understand through the images and context in which they are used.

However, there are a few derogatory terms used to classify Chinese people that may help the reader to understand the plight of the American Born Chinese. The first is the name of one of the main characters: Chin-kee. There is another part in the book where a bully passes the Jin Wang and his friends saying, “Hey, I **chink** it’s getting a little nippy out here,” and his friend follows with, “You’re right! I’m getting’ **gook** bumps!” (96). This might be passed without understanding why the following frames show the three Chinese students flushed with embarrassment.

The teacher could deal with these terms by teaching the different effects that propaganda and hate have had throughout the history of the world. There are links to propaganda posters in the enrichment text section.

Background Knowledge

Understanding the history of political cartoons would be helpful for the students to understand this book, especially the story of Chin-kee. Many of his lines are directly quoted from a cartoon written by Pat Oliphant during the Chinese spy-plane Crisis, mocking Chinese people, telling tales of their exaggerated foreign behaviors. The teacher may use other political cartoons to demonstrate how this affected the thinking of many people, for example, modern-day election cartoons, Nazi propaganda posters, etc.

Something else that will be important for the students to understand is the use of fables in different cultures. The fable of the Monkey King is one that is known throughout China, and has been passed down for over four centuries. How are fables used and why are they popular?



The students will also need to understand some of the basics of Chinese culture, along with the way it affects children who have been born within the United States, but to parents who come from a different country, with different cultures. Essentially, what does it mean to be American Born Chinese? A book that may be helpful is a

history of Chinese in America entitled, [The Chinese in America](#) by Iris Chang.

<http://www.yellowbridge.com/literature/chinese-in-america-review.php>

Implications for Students of Diversity

This book could be very useful, if it is carefully taught, in helping students recognize that people, regardless of their ethnic background, generally experience similar feelings of loneliness, jealousy, anger, and kindness. *American Born Chinese* is a fantastic representation of how a boy who comes from a different ethnic background than most of his peers, overcomes the pressure to fit in. It is a struggle for the majority of this book: many students, whether they are of the majority or minority, will be able to relate to this. It can be applied to any set of differences.

Because this book mentions a few derogatory terms regarding people of Chinese ancestry, if it is taught or referred to out of context, some of the children could be potentially offended. It will be important to note that the author is American Born Chinese, also.

Gender Issues

This book does not focus significantly on the role of gender except in the story of Chin-kee. As he is the exaggerated stereotypical Chinese character, he behaves extremely inappropriately to a girl who is studying with his cousin Danny. He says things like, “Such pretty American girl with bountiful American bosom! Must bind feet and bear Chin-kee’s children!” (50). This is an example of hyperbole that illustrates that Chinese people do not actually behave like this, nor do they hold this type of belief (see previous section).



The Central Question or Enduring Issue

Acceptance of self- Jin Wang and the Monkey King both go through experiences of growth and difficulty. In the case of Chin-kee, his cousin Danny is the one who has to learn to accept Chin-kee for who he is. In the end, they find that they are all vitally connected, emphasizing the idea of self-acceptance. As they come to find out that their original form or culture is the best way for them, they also find great power. This power comes in the form of agility and courage, in the case of the monkey, and friendship and peace in the case of Jin Wang.

Research Issues/Project Ideas

Creative Writing- The students can create a fable that is connected with a social problem that they see in their school or in other familiar contexts to them. They could be required to use symbols and other literary devices to enhance these stories.

Imagery and interpreting a text-

Assign the students to create a representation of a social issue that they have witnessed either at home or at school. It is acceptable to use the same issues represented in *American Born Chinese*. It will be their task to create some sort of representation of their ideas. Following the theme of graphic novels, and the idea that the text does not have to be completely created through words, offer them the options of creating a movie, PowerPoint, graphic novel, photo essay, etc. Leave them with requirements of a certain amount of required text, but ask them to consider elements they have studied while reading this graphic novel, such as facial expressions, colors, space, etc.

Enrichment Texts

This site has several examples of Nazi propaganda posters that could be used to demonstrate the use of propaganda throughout history.

<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/posters2.htm>

This site has several examples of modern campaign posters that could be used to teach about the use of current propaganda.

<http://www.zazzle.com/campaign+posters>

This is an exaggerated cartoon depicting Chinese in America. It includes an explanation under the image.

<http://www.harperweek.com/09Cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon.asp?Month=March&Date=11>

This article shows several examples of exaggerated propaganda against Chinese. It also offers information about the significance of the different elements that make up one of these images.

<http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/printable/4975/>

This is the interview where Yang comments on the Pat Oliphant cartoon that offended him, leading to the creation of Chin-kee's character, as well as the name of the high school. He also discusses other factors that were involved in the creation of this graphic novel, along with several others.

http://tcj.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=666&Itemid=48

And more on the Chinese Spy-plane Crisis

http://www.americans-world.org/digest/regional_issues/china/china9.cfm

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/jan-june01/china_plane.html



Gene Luen Yang's website includes a link to his blog, more about his comics and other graphic novels, access to communication with him, and many other features.

This is a good place for the students to become familiar with the author of a book: to see

what he is like in his everyday life. They can also make connections about his style of writing.

<http://www.humblecomics.com/index.htm>

This website will help the students become more familiar with the legend of the Monkey King. It is brief, and a simple retelling of the story that inspired Yang's character in *American Born Chinese*.

<http://www.wku.edu/~yuanh/China/tales/monkey.html>

Other bildungsromans that may be helpful are:

- *Bless Me, Ultima*, by Rudolfo Anaya (1972)
- *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain (1884)
- *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd (2002)
- *Stargirl*, by Jerry Spinelli