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Final Project: Thematic Unit for *American Born Chinese*

**Young Adult Literature**

What Young Adult books can provide students probably better than any other kind of text is a relate ability. After all, these books are written specifically to target the hopes, struggles, and basic every-day experiences of the age group. It is an age during which most people are unsure of themselves and what they want to do with the rest of their life. Young adults simultaneously want to live life to the fullest and try to be the best they can be while hoping they can get through the day-to-day of dealing with their friends, family, school, employment, or some other area of their life. People often overlook the significance of the young adult phase of an individual's life, saying that there are bigger and more important problems in the world to worry about, but I am sure that many adults today still hold their memories during that period of their life to be the best, the most cringe-worthy, or—as in most people's experiences—a mixture of both kinds. It is in young adulthood that we not only search for our identity, but also are first given the opportunity to transform ourselves drastically, trying on multiple identities, and learning along the way what works and what does not. Throughout this process, however, one thing does stay consistent; the question “Do I fit in?”

**Incorporating *American Born Chinese***

*American Born Chinese* is a necessity in the classroom in not only the fact that it covers a great span of young adult ideas, themes, and issues, but in that the reader is presented with characters who drastically want to change their situation but can only do so through abandoning a part of their selves. The characters throughout the course of the novel, specifically Jin / Danny,

literally have the most extreme cases of identity crisis when compared to other figures in any media or medium, whether a graphic novel, movie, or traditional novel. What makes the book especially useful in the classroom is that the book can do this while still being realistic and true to the characters' motives and reasoning, being an easy read, and incorporating humor that is insightful, purposeful in the structure of the story, and genuinely funny. If this does not already sound like a typical classroom book, the novel also stands out simply because the fact that it is a graphic novel and is a type of text most students are unfamiliar with, especially in the classroom setting. Just like its characters, it may not seem as if this book fits in with the standard crowd or curriculum, but it is well worth it. Though in young adulthood one may work to be identified as someone who has sole responsibility over own identity, it is undeniable that people still place labels them. These labels may be good or bad, but what matters most is how that person responds and whether they accept or disregard those labels. Stereotypes and labels will still exist and can not be eradicated by a single person, so the book is also essential in that it shows the reader they have to confront and live with these problematic aspects of life and that it is a part of growing up. I want my students to understand the strength in standing up for their own beliefs as well as being able to live happily even when everything is not going their way. I want to ultimately understand the power of themselves as individuals and to realize that what makes them different is something that they can embrace as something positive.

### **My Approach to the Project / Lesson**

When I began this project, I knew I wanted to make a project that I knew I would be able to benefit from as a future teacher. I have had some experience in leading a classroom and structuring daily activities, so the idea of structuring a full unit like I would as a teacher was very appealing. However, I also knew that while I thematic unit might benefit myself, it might not be

the type of resource students or other teachers would be able to get much information from, at least information that may be specific to their needs as students or when teaching their own units. Within my work I am all about collaboration and sharing the good work and experiences of both failed and successful lessons and classroom discussions, so I wanted to attempt assembling an entire website dedicated to resources concerning *American Born Chinese* that would operate much like the dramaturgical websites I had within my theatre classes. Perhaps more than anything else, I wanted to use the website to show how I could present information in a visual and dynamic way that differed from the ordinary structure of a lesson plan or other written document. After all, everyone learns in a different way and it is my job as a developing teacher to expand my teaching methods to reach everyone I can.

### **Lesson Structure**

The lessons I plan to teach in my unit are created specifically for a high school class. Ideally, this would be a ninth or tenth grade class and this unit would appear near the end of the school year, as *American Born Chinese* builds off many of the themes discussed in other Young Adult novels and is easy to read (meaning students will have less to worry about with other end of the school year activities). Like I stated earlier, my thematic unit itself centers on the idea of what it means to fit in. This of course encompasses the ideas of what it means to fit in, why people want to fit in, as well as what it means to be if people don't fit in or don't attempt to fit in. The lesson lasts a full two weeks with classroom activities and discussions while reading the book in the first week and then applying the basic concepts and the theme of fitting in to other pieces of literature (for instance *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and the short play "Beauty" [a PDF of this is included on the website] as well as the student's adolescent lives. Daily, students will be asked to respond to their experiences reading the book or be asked to

expand upon the major themes in the book by recording journal entries that combine the use of words, illustrations, and anything else a student wishes to use. (They will be provided with a rubric that requires them to try a variety of ways of expressing their ideas if they want to get anything higher than a C.) These daily assignments will culminate into a large portfolio of entries and other artifacts, which students will be asked to share part of during the end of the unit. For this students are encouraged to work with a group of their peers to present creative projects (such as a short and interactive lesson, a short graphic novel, or a paper that talks about their personal and collective experiences) though they may work by themselves if they choose to. The reason I encourage partner work is because I want my students to actively engage with and relate to their peers about their experiences. Just like how *American Born Chinese* can challenge some of our beliefs when reading [see the anticipation quiz on the “Teaching *American Born Chinese*” website under the Thematic Unit section; remember how much people got into the conversation!] I want my students to continue to think about these issues through understanding the beliefs of others while trying to maintain your own. If students work by themselves, they simply will not get this experience. Some may find group work difficult, but classroom time and discussion will allow the transition into group work to be natural and easily accomplishable, as long as they stay on task. I would also like to say that after the first week of my unit, I will make my teaching website for *American Born Chinese* available to my students. I really want them to have the experience of reading the book by itself before using the website as a primary resource. The website should be used as an extension tool to help students gain a greater comprehension of what they are doing.

**The Works Cited and other documents are located on in the Thematic Unit section of the website ([www.teachingamericanbornchinese.weebly.com](http://www.teachingamericanbornchinese.weebly.com))**