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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before, while, or after you're finished reading, you may have some questions about the novel. You're sure to find some answers here.

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CURRENT CHINESE AND ASIAN AMERICAN DEMOGRAPHICS

Background Information

List of Themes

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ASIAN GROUPS IN THE U.S.

Population Rankings

Adult Characteristics

Characteristics of U.S. Asian adults by origin (based on self-described race or ethnicity)

CHINESE*	Foreign born	76%
FILIPINO	U.S. citizen	69%
INDIAN	Median age (years)	43
VIETNAMESE	Married	59%
KOREAN	Less than a high school diploma	18%
JAPANESE	Bachelor's degree or more	51%
PAKISTANI	Speaks English less than "very well"	48%
CAMBODIAN	Median household income	\$65,050
HMONG	Living in poverty	14%
THAI	Homeownership rate	62%
LAOTIAN		
BANGLADESHI		
INDONESIAN		
SRI LANKAN		
MALAYSIAN		

* Includes Taiwanese

ASK YOURSELF:

- Based on this information, would you say these demographics are accurate to Jin and his peers?

ASIAN GROUPS IN THE U.S.

Population Rankings

Adult Characteristics

The 20 largest U.S. Asian groups by origin (based on self-described race or ethnicity)

All U.S. Asians – 17,320,856

TOTAL
Including those <18 years old

1	Chinese*	4,010,114
2	Filipino	3,416,840
3	Indian	3,183,063
4	Vietnamese	1,737,433
5	Korean	1,706,822
6	Japanese	1,304,286
7	Pakistani	409,163
8	Cambodian	276,667
11	Hmong	260,073
10	Thai	237,583
9	Laotian	232,130
12	Bangladeshi	147,300
15	Burmese	100,200
13	Indonesian	95,270

circumstances?

- Knowing that the book is autobiographical, do you think Yang grew up with these same demographics?
- Make a guess: how do you think the demographics for Asian Americans compare to people of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds today?
- Make a prediction: how will Asian Americans be represented in the United States compared to other nationalities in the next few years? What social changes or impacts might this make?

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15	Nepalese	59,490
14	Sri Lankan	45,381
15	Malaysian	26,179
15	Bhutanese	19,439
15	Mongolian	18,344
15	Okinawan	11,326

* Includes 215,441 Taiwanese

GENE LUEN YANG'S BLOG

Yang provides much of his reason for writing *American Born Chinese* through his website's blog. He also talks a lot about the origins of many of the characters in his stories.

Origins of 'American Born Chinese' - Part 1

Yang discusses the ancient Chinese folk hero The Monkey King.



ASK YOURSELF:

- Can you think of characters who are like The Monkey King in the United States? In other countries or cultures? What qualities do they share? What characteristics are different or more highly praised in different cultures?
- Do you believe Yang made a smart decision in changing The Monkey King's original Buddhist themes to Christian ones? In what ways does this contribute to the book's theme?
- [Google image search "The Monkey King."](#) How has he been drawn and interpreted in different

Origins of 'American Born Chinese' - Part 2

Yang talks about his very personal connection to Jin's character.

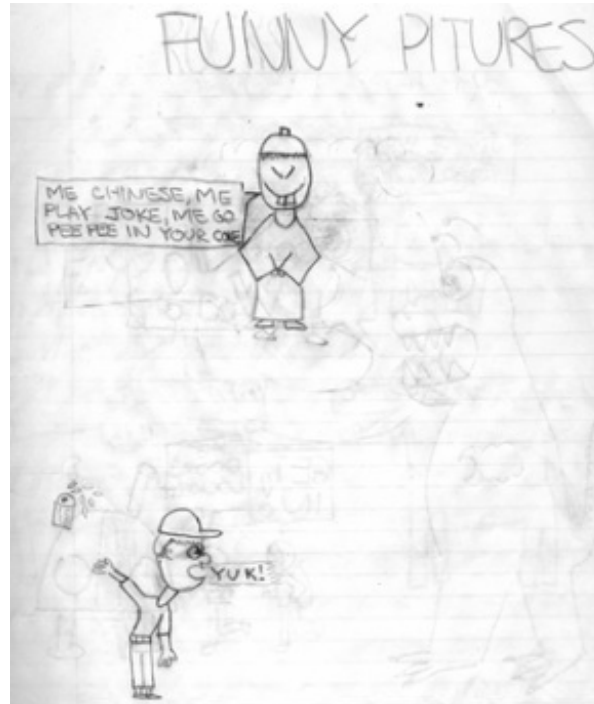


Origins of 'American Born Chinese' - Part 3

Yang recalls the way in which he discovered one of his childhood drawings, Cousin Chin-Kee, and how he developed the character to be the crazy character he is.

styles and medium? What is your favorite? Least favorite? How would you depict him?

- Do you identify with any character in the book like Yang relates to Jin? In what ways are your characteristics or experiences similar or different?
 - Do you know real-life people like the characters in the book? Describe and compare them to the story.
 - Yang describes his real-life experiences with racism to be much more complex compared to this book. Do you agree or disagree with his statement? Explain by recalling your experiences.
-
- Do you find Yang's drawings of Chin-Kee to be



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ASIAN CULTURES AND BELIEFS

THE MONKEY KING

The Monkey King (Sun Wukong) became an important Chinese figure in the 17th century novel *The Journey to the West*. This is an epic novel with 100 chapters that depicts the journey of a Buddhist monk and his companions to India. (A PDF copy of the full text is on the right side of

funny? Why do you think this is? How did you feel when you did / did not laugh? Why do you believe people respond strongly to Cousin Chin-kee (in a good or a bad way)?

- When Yang drew the drawing to the left, do you believe he identified more with the Chin-kee character or the (white) kid at the bottom of the page? Who do you identify most with?
- Yang calls Chin-kee a dangerous character. Do you think this is an accurate statement? Explain.
- If you showed your friends, family, or a stranger the picture to the left or other pages that feature Chin-kee, how do you think they would respond? How might the responses of people of various ages, cultures, or backgrounds be different?
- Can you think of any characters like Chin-kee?
- If you were to write and draw an American version of Chin-kee, what characteristics or stereotypes might he embody?

[Complete Text of 'The Journey to the West'](#)

["Monkey Kingdom" Website](#)

the page if you would like to behold its massiveness.) The story itself is based on the actual pilgrimage of the monk Xuanzang. In the story the fictionalized monk **Hsuan-Tsang** is accompanied by three companions: **The Monkey King**, **The Monk Pig**, and **The Sand Friar**.

The Monkey King is the most powerful of the three companions, though he has a quick temper (as demonstrated in *American Born Chinese*). Through his website "Monkey Kingdom," Yang provides even more information on this figure and his personal connection to him.

As a celebrated cultural figure (akin to Mickey Mouse) in the United States, The Monkey King continues to live through several folk stories, cartoons, comics, operas, television series, movies, and other mediums with different variations. Many of these are hundreds of years old but new works continue to be produced.

Look up images of The Monkey King and review some of the media clips on the side of the page to see how the story is a part of Chinese culture. Even try to look up multiple examples of similar forms

(there are many great examples of Chinese opera) and see what parts of the legend are kept the same and modified.

ASK YOURSELF:

- What parts of The Monkey King story remain consistent? What parts change? Why do you think this is?
- In your opinion, does one form of telling the story work better than the others? What strengths or weaknesses do you see in each form?
- How does The Monkey King himself appear in each story? How does drawing style, animation, make-up and costuming, or special effects affect how you perceive The Monkey King?
- What differences do you see in how the story is presented when the film utilizes either Chinese or American language or is translated for different audience?

WESTERN CULTURES AND BELIEFS

THE OX, THE EAGLE, THE HUMAN, AND THE LION

The ox, the eagle, the human, and the lion that appear in *American Born Chinese* may seem to be associated with Eastern cultures and mythology but instead are greatly associated with Christianity and Western culture. Each of these symbols is associated with one of the Four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John):

	Matt Lion	Jesus as the righteous King of the Jews, the <i>Lion</i> of the Tribe of Judah. Emphasis on <i>righteousness</i> . [Spoke 18, pg 323]
	Mark Ox	Jesus as the Servant and the Workman of the Lord. Emphasis on His Miracles, Strength, and <i>Action</i> . [Spoke 19, pg 331]
	Luke Man	Jesus as the Great Physician and Friend of Sinners. Emphasis on His <i>Humanity</i> , Wisdom, and Mercy. [Spoke 20, pg 342]
	John Eagle	Jesus as the Word of God, the Living Bread that "came down from heaven." Emphasis on His <i>Divinity</i> . [Spoke 21, pg 355]

This helps solidify the Christian morals and values in Yang's story.

ASK YOURSELF:

- Of all of the different figures in Christianity, what do you think Yang chose these four?
- If these characters are associated with disciples, what other roles might characters take in Christianity? Make sure to explain and be able to defend your answers.
- How do the roles of these figures compare to the roles of other Christian characters in literature or in other genres and mediums?

ASIAN PEOPLE IN WESTERN MEDIA AND POP CULTURE

Throughout the book, we see references to popular culture and modern society. The world in which Yang creates the story is definitely our own or one very similar. Unfortunately, however, our popular culture is one that still exploits Asian caricatures. Yang uses these Asian popular culture icons in *American Born Chinese* in order to demonstrate existing stereotypes. Primarily this is conveyed through Cousin Chin-Kee.

Long Duk Dong from *Sixteen Candles*

Like many movies and characters from the 1980s, Long Duk Dong continues to be one of the most referenced. However, many people (Yang included) believe that Dong is a caricature and does not portray the Asian community very well. Yang recalls having his non-Asian friends ask him to say popular film lines like "What's happening, Hotstuff?" without them considering that fact that it might be offensive.

ASK YOURSELF:

- What is your opinion of Long Duk Dong?
- In what ways does he compare to / contrast with Cousin Chin-Kee?

William Hung from *American Idol*

William Hung became famous when he had an awful audition in the early seasons of *American Idol*. He became an instant sensation and ended up producing a music video as well as three albums. Today, many people believe that Hung was exploited and was purposefully ridiculed by those who employed him.

ASK YOURSELF:

- Why do you think Hung became as popular?
- In the "She Bangs" video, what stereotypes do you see? These can be cultural stereotypes, as well as stereotypes about the music

as well as stereotypes about the music industry, pop stars, woman, or anything else. What do you think was the purpose of this?

The Back Dorm Boys

The Back Dorm Boys are a duo of college boys who become popular for lip-synching to pop hits when YouTube was first starting. They are different than any of the other Asian pop culture figures presented in the book in that they are associated with Jin and Wei-Chen's characters and not Cousin Chin-Kee.

ASK YOURSELF:

- Why do you think Yang chose the the Back Dorm Boys to be representational of Jin and Wei-Chen?
- Do you see any stereotypes or caricatures in this video?
- Do you think the fact that they produced the video independently makes a difference in how they portrayed themselves or were perceived by the public.

What other Asian figures exist in pop culture?

BEING AMERICAN BORN CHINESE IN THE MODERN WORLD

In book, Yang presents a world in which Jin and his Asian friends have trouble fitting in with their American peers. Jin has to deal with the stereotypes, the names, and rude jokes that people call him and his friends because they are Asian. In fact, Jin resents being Chinese because of this and wants to embrace the parts of himself that he believes to be American.

But what if the Jin's circumstances had been different and he had originally moved from his Asian neighborhood to

China instead of his very Americanized school? Today, many individuals born in the United States are moving to China for new opportunities in the employment and other reasons, and many of these people happen to be of Asian decent.

ASK YOURSELF: Do you think Jin would have as much trouble fitting into the Chinese culture since he identifies himself as both American and Chinese or would Jin have the same issues? Would he be happier or make friends more easily?

WATCH THIS: YouTube journalist Stephy Chung interviewed several young people who were raised in the United States and identified themselves as both American and Chinese. They talked about their experiences in both America and China, and specifically talked about how making a their permanent home in China affected their cultural identity.

Part one primarily focuses on the interviewees and gathering their thoughts on their experiences, while part two brings in Professor Jinzhao Li of Beijing Foreign Studies University to discuss her study on the identity

transformation of Chinese-Americans in China.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

1. Do you relate to the experiences of any of the people in the video?
2. In what ways have their cultural identities changed from when they were living in the United States?
3. How are they treated by their peers (who are born in Asia or are from other cultures)?
4. What stereotypes or beliefs do people born in Asia have of Asian people born in the United States?
5. Is Professor Li's study accurate to the experiences of the people in the documentary? Accurate to your experiences? Explain.

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