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IMPORTANT THEMES

The universal themes in *American Born Chinese* motivate each of the main characters and eventually bring all three separate story lines together.

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Most of this information is directly pulled from "Concept / Vocabulary Analysis of *American Born Chinese*."

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-yotzuh, 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 / LABELS

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.

ASK YOURSELF: What stereotypes and labels are presented in the text? While most of these stereotypes are bad, there are some good labels as well, like the word "friend." The below word cluster found the following words to be used the most (after title labels had been removed). Are you surprised by the results? Why do you think certain words appeared more often than others? (Hint: Think out how the largest words are linked to important themes and the story structure.)

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