Concept Analysis of American Born Chinese
American Born Chinese
By Gene Luen Yang
Published by First Second, 2006

Plot Summary & Organizational Patterns

American Born Chinese is a graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang that revolves around three different stories. These stories start out separate but slowly connect and progress with each other. The three main characters are the Monkey King, a legendary monkey who rules over Flower-Fruit Mountain, Jin Wang, a Chinese American who is struggling to fit in with his new culture, and Danny, an all-American boy that has an obnoxious Chinese cousin Chin-Kee who visits annually. The novel progresses by switching between the three different stories that do not seem related at first but slowly become one story with one theme in the end. Each section is separated by a picture of the main character in that chapter, with the exception of Danny’s story, and each section is roughly ten to twenty pages long. Also, the genre of graphic novels is shown through dialogue and picture panels, which students may have to be taught how to read. This chapter analysis is also built for a ninth grade classroom but could easily be adapted for other grade levels. (The following images are the symbols shown at the beginning of each section showing whose story is about to be told. Left to right; Monkey King’s story, Jin Wang’s story, and Danny’s story, although the picture is of Chin-Kee.)

Big Question

In this novel, Gene Luen Yang brings up several issues involving identity, culture, and acceptance. However, the novel’s strongest theme is that of finding one’s identity within his or her culture and society. The big question that this analysis and Novelinks is: who am I and do I follow a stereotype? This question will challenge students to begin their own search for an identity but be wary of the stereotypes that are in our own culture.
Background Knowledge

Here are some things to consider teaching or explaining to students before teaching the actual novel. Each of these will greatly support the students by helping them understand key themes, ideas, and issues. Although this is not an all-inclusive list of the things you can teach students, the following background knowledge will give you a solid basis to teach the big questions to students and help scaffold students’ learning.

- **Graphic Novel Genre**
  Teaching students what a graphic novel and how to read the genre should be the first thing to consider when teaching this novel. If a student has never read a graphic novel or comic book, then you can begin students’ learning by showing comic strips or teaching about the process of reading the genre. This is crucial for students to understand in what order events occur and some of the more subtle messages that the graphic novel presents. Students may also need to be taught how a graphic novel can be just as informative a regular novel, or in other words, the literary legitimacy behind the graphic novel genre. This way students will treat the novel the same way they would any other text taught in the classroom and not see this graphic novel as a time to not pay attention or put effort into understanding the text.

- **Culture and Stereotypes**
  This graphic novel is filled with references to several different cultures and the stereotypes associated with them. Students will need to be able to recognize their own culture as well as the culture that are in conflict with each other in the graphic novel. This can especially be seen with Jin Wang and his struggle of being Chinese American but wanting to fit in with his new American culture. Students will also need to know what a stereotype is and some of the common stereotypes our culture perceives. Students will need to be taught the idea of not only American culture but Chinese culture as well in order to see key issues or moments present in the novel.

- **Chinese Culture and Fables**
  Although this could be viewed as an extension of the last point, it is good to show students the fables that drive this novel and the Chinese cultural perceptions behind them. For example, the Monkey King is based on Sun Wukong from the Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, which is well known within Chinese culture but not American culture. Also, it would be good to show students that Tze-Yo-Tzuh is the Chinese mythological equivalent to a creator of the universe and all creatures. Although this is explained well on its own within the novel, it may be good to show...
students the Chinese cultural perception of deities or their equivalents to American cultures. (Many can be seen in the image on the previous page from page 7 of the novel.) Showing the perceptions and interpretations that Chinese culture has on their myths can also help students to see the implications or motifs the myth represents within the graphic novel. Although this may be easy to do within our own culture, it is good to show students how to recognize it within other cultures and the stories told by that culture.

- **Cultural References and Allusions**

  *American Born Chinese* is filled with references and allusions to both American and Chinese culture. Students will need to be taught how to see these references and the meanings that can be drawn from them or how to spot them amongst the story’s details. Since this novel was published in 2006, it may be hard for some of today’s students to spot the cultural references about American ideals or situations, and it will be even harder for them to understand the subtle references to Chinese culture. Even among colleagues, some of the references may not be fully realized or understood. Students should be explicitly taught how to find the origins of such references or shown the actual references to teach the meanings that may lie behind some of the novel’s panels.

## Related Study Issues

### Key Themes of *American Born Chinese*:

- **Search for Identity**

  This theme is the driving force for the novel and is what all of the characters are trying to do within each story. Each character is striving to find out who they are and what defines them. This would be helpful in the classroom for students who may be struggling with identity issues to see that they are not the only ones who struggle.

  First example, the Monkey King searches for his identity among the other deities. He wants to be treated like the other deities but finds that since he is only a “monkey” he is treated less than the others. Over the course of his story he eventually comes to accept what he is and establish his identity among the other deities and become happy with his place within his culture.

  Second, Jin Wang searches for his identity within his current and past culture. He is struggling to find his place among his fellow Americans but seems to be always placed as an outsider due to his heritage. This is especially true when Wei-Chen, a new student from Taiwan, moves to the school and everyone then begins to associate the two students together, although Jin Wang at first wants nothing to do with him.

  Third, Danny is struggling to keep his identity as his cousin Chin-Kee works against the identity that he has established at his current school. This leaves Danny feeling like he has no choice but to go to a different school every year in order to establish a new identity before Chin-Kee comes and ruins his reputation. Yet this year is different, and Danny resolves to confront his cousin and his identity.
• **Assigning Stereotypes**
  Throughout the novel, particularly in the sections about Jin Wang and Danny, there are several representations of stereotypes that our culture perceives and tries to emulate in others. The graphic novel explores the dangers of assigning stereotypes to people and cultures. This biggest representation of this can be seen in Chin-Kee and how he embodies all of the stereotypes that are common among Americans about Chinese people and culture, which is emulated in the panel on the right from page 48 (note the Chinese food luggage bags and his language). Everything from his appearance to his mannerisms emulates Gene Luen Yang’s understanding of Chinese stereotypes about his culture and the harm that has come from it. This novel will also be a good way to ease students into handling their own stereotypes or stereotypes that they may subscribe to.

• **Finding Acceptance and Coming of Age**
  This could be argued as the strongest theme within the novel and is expressed by the phrase on the back of the novel; “Three very different characters, one simple goal; to fit in.” (Italics added for emphasis.) Each of the characters is trying to find how to become accepted into their culture or finding a place where they can be accepted. The Monkey King wants to be accepted like one of the other deities, Jin Wang wants to be accepted by his American peers, and Danny wants to keep his acceptance that he has been able to establish. All the characters also go through a coming of age story that many of the students can relate to in one way or another.

**Setting:**
*American Born Chinese* has two distinct settings where the stories take place. The first is the fable-oriented lands of the Monkey King, and second is the average American school setting. The story of the Monkey King takes place at the fictional area of Flower-Fruit Mountain, where he was born, and the mythical heavens where the other deities live. This setting is filled with Chinese cultural references and design as it is represented as a fable. The story of Jin Wang takes place at a fictional American school that could resemble the current school your students are in, although its name is never specifically mentioned. And the story of Danny is set around the fictional high school of Oliphant. All these settings will require little background knowledge to understand or interpret for the stories.

**Point of View/Narrative Voice:**
The novel told the same way that many graphic novels, comic books, or comic strips. Much of the story is portrayed with dialogue bubbles that show who is talking and when a particular character is talking. These dialogue bubbles are then combined with boxes that give context or background information to what is displayed in the panel. The boxes for the Monkey King story are told from a third-person perspective, the boxes for Jin Wang are told from a first-person perspective, but there are no boxes present in any of Danny’s panels because of how it is
supposed to be read as if they were being watched like a sitcom show. However, it is good to note when there are angle brackets, < and >, surrounding a phrase said in a box it means the character is speaking in Chinese. (This can be seen on the panel to the right on page 37.)

This style of reading may be challenging for some students depending on their background knowledge or understanding of the graphic novel genre. However, it will help to show students how the different stories are told and the elements they should look for as they read each story.

Characterization:

- **Monkey King**
  The Monkey King is the ruler of Flower-Fruit Mountain and a deity was born from a rock. He becomes a master of the martial arts, rules his people fairly, but then decides one day to go and try to be like the other deities in heaven. He then spends the rest of the novel trying to become like the other deities only to eventually find how to accept himself as he is, a monkey. (Panel on the right of the Monkey King is from page 10.)

- **Jin Wang**
  A Chinese American boy who has recently moved to an all American school and just wants to fit in with the other white kids. He does not talk much and is constantly worried with trying to fit in with his peers, which leads him to start changing things about himself. Over the course of the novel he becomes friends with Wei-Chen Sun and has a crush on a girl at school, Amelia. (He can be seen at the top of the page in a blue shirt and on the panel to the right from page 30.)

- **Danny**
  He is a white, American teenager who is attending Oliphant High School and is your average student at school. He tends to fairly popular and considers himself to be a normal kid; however, once a year his cousin Chin-Kee
comes to visit him and always makes him extremely unpopular with the other students or makes him appear as a weirdo to his classmates. Because of this, Danny feels that he must move every year in order to start over at a new school. Yet this year he decides to stand up and confront his cousin while further trying to reconcile his identity among his peers. (He is seen on the panel to the right from page 197.)

- **Tze-Yo-Tzuh**
  He is the creator of the world and all life including the deities. He plays a key role in helping the Monkey King recognize who he is and his role in life. (He can be seen on the second panel to the right from page 70.)

- **Wei-Chen Sun**
  He is a Taiwanese immigrant who begins to attend the same school as Jin Wang shortly after Jin begins attending the school. He sees Jin and him as the same and seeks his friendship over the course of the novel. Yet some unexpected events change both their lives as Jin searches for his identity.

- **Chin-Kee**
  He is Danny’s cousin who visits Danny once a year. He is the embodiment of the stereotypical Chinese man with an impeccable Chinese-English (Chinglish) accent. He works hard at embarrassing Danny and fully embraces his stereotypical ideologies.

**Allusion:**
As mentioned before, *American Born Chinese* is filled with allusions and references to popular culture in both America and China. Yet many of the allusions revolve around Chinese culture and exist within the story of the Monkey King, while the popular references lie within the stories of Jin Wang and Danny. Students should be shown some of the references and taught how to recognize other references present within the novel.

**Cultural Connections:**
As mentioned before, the graphic novel is filled with cultural connections to both American and Chinese cultures. Students may need to be taught how to see such connection or shown how the novel relates to their culture. Yet there are some references within the novel that students may not be able to relate to, since the novel was published in 2006 and some references have lost their
current cultural appeal. Although the references may be old, the ideas behind such references are timeless and can be used to teach students things that occur within their culture. Also, several of the strategies from this unit cover the idea of teaching students how to see or make cultural connections.

(The panel above shows a reference to Chin-Kee being compared to the show Everybody Loves Raymond, which has been long canceled by now and probably unknown to most students. But it does shape how the sections with Chin-Kee should be read, which is further hinted by the laugh track at the bottom of the image from page 43.)

Dialogue:
Dialogue is an essential literary term that students should know or be recognized with before starting this graphic novel. This is because most of the novel is carried through dialogue and not through the usual consistent narrator with “he said” or “she said” moments. Students should be able to recognize who is speaking, when each character is speaking, and how to read the dialogue bubbles or informative boxes in each panel.

Frame Story:
For some students, the organization of the novel can make this challenging for some students. Many students may not have experience with a novel that tells different stories at the same time and be able to keep track of all the different details that they have read. However, it is good to show students how the ending has a greater impact due to the fact that the three stories start out independent and slowly reveal how they all connect with each other.

Genre:
It is important to teach students how to read the genre of graphic novels before starting to read the novel in class. Students should be taught how to interpret the genre and how this genre is
American Born Chinese Concept Analysis

different than what is often presented in their English classrooms. Also, this genre may be easier for struggling students and reader to learn than other forms/genres of literature. Showing students this genre may also make some students more engaged in the classroom and connect them with more traditional forms of literature.

Imagery:
*American Born Chinese* is filled with imagery and art that students may not know how to interpret. There are a lot of subtle motions, actions, and expressions that are not described or explicitly expressed that helps the story progress. Students will need to learn how to interpret such imagery and how the panels can say as much as a text can, although there may be no words within the panel itself.

Affective Issues

Each of the above mentioned issues could be related to students as they read the novel and could lead to ideas for classroom discussion or development. Since the characters in the novel are around the same age as the students, each student should be able to connect to one of the characters in one way or another. Whether it is through Jin Wang as he searches to fit in, through the Monkey King as he tries to change who he is, or through Danny as he struggles to keep his identity with Chin-Kee near him, students can find something to relate to in this novel. If a student does not connect with one of the characters, then the overall situation or themes should be relatable to them.

Vocabulary Issues

*American Born Chinese* has a few vocabulary words that may be difficult or unknown to a ninth grade classroom; however, the largest difficulty stems from the constant use of decade specific references (such as the reference to S.A.R.S. on page 202), cultural colloquialisms (such as “It ain’t gonna go down like that” on page 127), or the altering of the letters to match how Chin-Kee speaks (such as “Harro Amellica” on page 48). Students will need to be taught not only some vocabulary words but the meaning behind certain phrases and how to read what Chin-Kee is saying. Students will also need to be taught how to recognize the combination of the two when Chin-Kee is speaking in colloquialisms to reference a particular idea or to make a joke (such as “General tsao rooster punch” on page 210).

Implication for Students of Diversity

This is a great novel to explore the diversity of students and how different elements affect their place within their culture. The big question of the unit also allows for students to recognize stereotypes in order to see the implications that can have on the people the labels are placed on or how some labels may be placed on them for having a particular quality, gender, race, etc. The ending and tone of the novel also will help students with recognizing the need for accepting others while seeing that every person should seek for his or her own identity.
This novel is also great for reluctant, struggling, and diverse readers within the classroom. The genre of graphic novels can be more engaging for some students due to its layout with both visual and textual elements, especially those who are not native English speakers since it will teach them to recognize non-linguistic elements present within the English language or American culture. However, such students should be given more time to interact with the text than what is planned on the Unit Outline associated with this Concept Analysis.

Gender Issues

Although this graphic novel does not directly deal with gender issues, it does bring up some of the problems that are held within stereotypes about gender issues. This can be seen in Chin-Kee when he is expressing his desires for a woman in which he can enact old Chinese practices on, which is often associated with the culture when believing in the stereotype. However, current Chinese culture does not follow such practices anymore and find the stereotype offensive.

There are a few moments where the novel delves into the thought process of Jin Wang and Danny as they express their interests or thoughts about the opposite sex. This could be turned into a gender issue with your students, although it would be more oriented towards males’ perception of dating than actual issues among the genders.

Research Issues/Project Ideas:

- **Creative Writing**
  Students can engage in several creative writing activities including: creating their own graphic novel page with panels and text, writing about a time where they have seen stereotypes used in their school, or having a class discussion about current cultural issues.

- **Exploring Graphic Novels**
  Students could further explore the genre of graphic novels and look further into other graphic novels that students could relate to for further reading. Graphic novels can act as a bridge text, a text that connects one book to another, to more classic texts. For example, several traditional texts have been made into graphic novels like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Beowulf*.

- **Exploring Other Texts**
  The strategies associated with this unit could easily be applied to other novels or lead into other texts that carry the same themes, issues, or designs. Such novels can range from
containing issues about culture and race to themes of acceptance and identity. Students should be shown how themes can carry across different genres of literature.

Text Sets and Enrichment Resources:
Many of the issues involving the author or Chinese culture can be found with a little searching online or in a library, yet here is a list of novels and other texts that can relate to the strategies attached to this unit or the genre that could be used to further engage students in the classroom.

- Calvin and Hobbes comics
- Far Side comics
- Political cartoons or propaganda
- Other graphic novels: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Beowulf*, *Avatar: the Last Airbender*, etc.
- *House on Mango Street*
- *Persepolis*
- *The Giver*
- *1984*
- *Holes*
- *The Outsiders*
- *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*
- *Friends*