

American Born Chinese

By Gene Luen Yang

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During Reading Strategy: Cultural Connections¹

Context:

Ninth graders should enjoy seeing how a genre that they might not have taken seriously before actually can be a meaningful form of literature. However, it is critical for students to be aware of deeper meaning through nonverbal means such as gestures, facial expressions, narrative flow in comic panels, and visual characterization. That way, they will have experienced some of the book in their own way, but will also be able to see it more critically as the story progresses and becomes more complicated.

Purpose:

The cultural connections strategy is recommended for use early on in the teaching of *American Born Chinese*, since it helps students to familiarize themselves with the ways meaning is conveyed in the graphic novel genre. Because of its prevalence in today's world of social media and digital texts, visual literacy is a vital part of the CCSS. This strategy alerts students to ways that meaning is conveyed through a combination of visual and verbal elements, helping them to realize how ideas present themselves in design as well as writing.

Materials Needed:

- Projector and some way of showing the *Far Side* comic and other images (online links listed below)
- Copies of *American Born Chinese*
- Scratch paper for an exit slip

Time Allotted:

20-25 minutes

Steps:

1. Begin by showing students Gary Larson's *Far Side* comic strip about dogs eating their homework (http://thoreau.colonial.net/Teachers/Jackson/01B666AD-004C57E3.0/Farside_Dogs_Eat_Homework.gif). Ask what is happening in the comic.

¹ Adapted from the presentation "Graphic Novels," Camille Elison, Jeff Sosa, and Michael Huefner, BYU, 2012.

American Born Chinese Cultural Connections

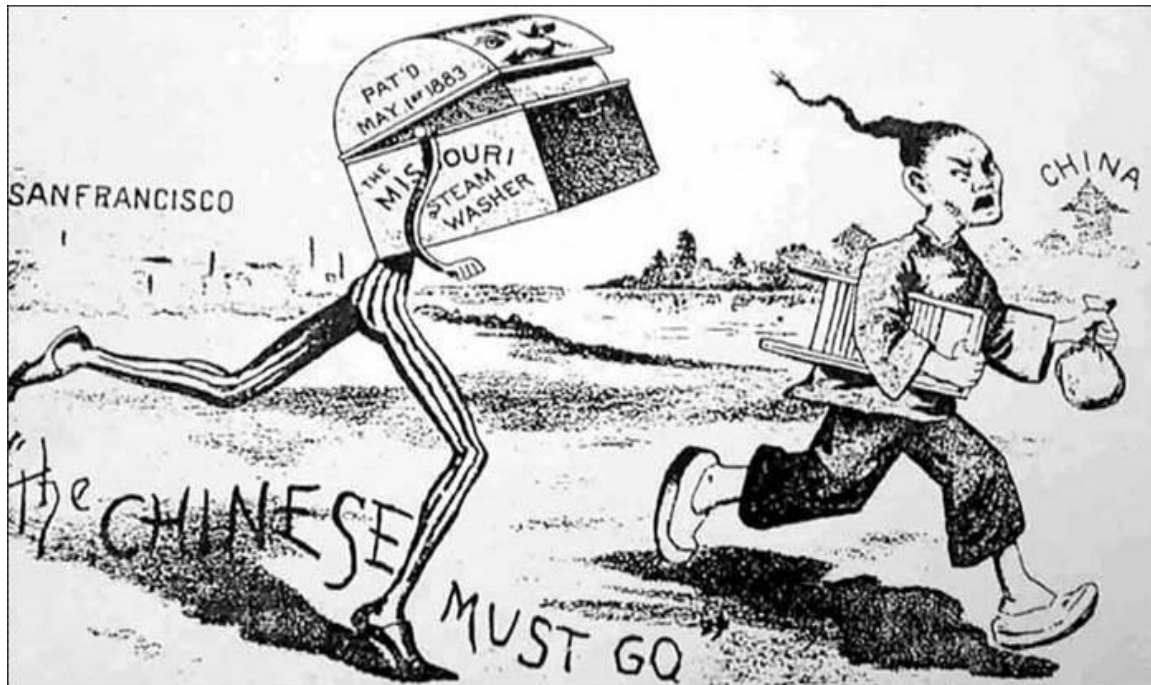
What is funny about it? How do we know what the joke is? (Because of a cultural connection to a well-known excuse for neglecting homework). Be sure to point out how both images and words contribute to the meaning, modeling how to make cultural connections explicit:

- The caption gives us the cultural hint about the old dog-eating-the-homework routine.
 - But the picture turns the tables by showing a guilty-looking classroom of dogs who have ironically done themselves in. We also see the classic, grouchy teacher with thick-rimmed glasses from the movies, clearly not happy with hands on hips—gestures and details that subtly enhance the meaning.
2. After modeling this first example, continue with the examples from the book, showing how the three images from *American Born Chinese* relate to pop culture and American history. Allow small groups of students to try to figure out the cultural references using their prior knowledge. Between images, consider regrouping as a class to discuss the cultural references that students have found in greater detail.
- **Image 1** – References to the American TV show, “Everybody Loves Raymond” (Chin- Kee panel on page 43 of novel, and Raymond <http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/51NxaYleqkL. SL500 AA300 .jpg>).
 - **Image 2** – References the fact that some makeup companies have tested their products on animals (page 90, making fun of what can be a gruesome process).
 - **Image 3** – References the cultural assumption that Asian students are more intelligent than mainstream American students (pages 111-13, and Asian nerd stereotype http://forums.watchuseek.com/attachments/-f2/534447d1318551794-brand-image-versus-reality-274876-asian_nerd.jpg).
 - **Image 4** – End with this image, which references anti-Chinese political cartoons in the 1880s that were openly racist (included on next page). Discuss how racial stereotypes can be much more sinister than simply pointing out how a group is perceived as different, revealing what a dangerously slippery slope stereotypes are. Also note how the character Chin-Kee is designed to bring old and destructive ideas to our attention.

Assessment:

Before students leave, have them write an exit slip explaining in two sentences or less why they think Gene Yang included one of the cultural references in his graphic novel or one they have noticed in their own reading. What is he trying to say?

How long have Asian stereotypes been around in America?
What is different now?



http://youngadulthoodliterature.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/chinese_1880s_cartoon.jpg

What is similar?

How can stereotypes be dangerous?

What other cultural connections can you find in the novel?