



American Born Chinese Teacher's Guide





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AMERICAN BORN CHINESE AND STEREOTYPES: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION



One of my greatest challenges with introducing the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang to my classes has always been my fear of how they might react to the character of Chin-Kee. As a scholar and educator, I know that his presence in the book is meant to invoke specific feelings in the reader – he is a deliberately and blatantly over the top stereotype that manifests years of racism and insensitivity towards not just those of Chinese descent, but all Asian people. As a result, I worry about how my students will receive this shocking and impactful reminder of the thoughtlessness of racism.

Yang himself, in an interview posted on the First Second website (the full article is linked in the “Opportunities for Further Learning” section on page 9 of this guide) said this of the character:

“Cousin Chin-Kee isn’t meant to be funny. He’s meant to come off the page and slap you in the face. If you’re laughing at him, I want you to do so with a knot in your stomach and a dry throat.” (Siegel)

He couldn’t be more correct. This character does put a knot in my stomach because you can never tell how kids will see this character. Although I have been fortunate enough to have not run into any issues teaching this book to date, I am always wary of the possibility of problems cropping up. Racism is a tough subject to broach and it takes a very gentle but firm touch to ensure that students don’t walk away feeling offended or insulted.

To these ends, I encourage you to step lightly, but teach this book. If you can front load the expectations and understand this character and why he exists in the novel, hopefully the kids in your class will see him for what he is, a blatantly negative reflection of the worst of mankind – the need to isolate one another because of differences. Yang himself, in the abovementioned interview, credits American pop culture, from newspaper cartoons to major motion pictures, for the inspiration for the character.

Chin-Kee is meant to shock you. He’s meant to upset you. He is meant to expose the hyper reality of those of Asian descent growing up in America. Yang himself says:

“The fact of the matter is, sometimes you have to exaggerate to get your point across. Sometimes a stereotype needs to be dressed up in bright yellow skin and a queue in order for folks to recognize its severity.” (Siegel)

This novel is a teachable moment, and sometimes this type of learning can be precarious. Follow your instincts, utilize the resources here (especially Gene’s own words), and you should walk away relatively unscathed.

~ Michael Gianfrancesco



AMERICAN BORN CHINESE PLOT SUMMARY



Jin Wang starts at a new school where he's the only Chinese-American student. When a boy from Taiwan joins his class, Jin doesn't want to be associated with an FOB (Fresh Off the Boat) like him. Jin just wants to be an all-American boy, because he's in love with an all-American girl. Danny is an all-American boy: great at basketball, popular with the girls. Danny's obnoxious Chinese cousin, Chin-Kee, comes for an annual visit. Unfortunately, it is such a disaster that it ruins Danny's reputation at school, leaving Danny with no choice but to transfer somewhere he can start all over again. The Monkey King has lived for thousands of years and mastered the arts of kung fu and the heavenly disciplines. He's ready to join the ranks of the immortal gods in heaven. But there's no place in heaven for a monkey. Each of these characters cannot help himself alone, but how can they possibly help each other? They're going to have to find a way—if they want fix the disasters their lives have become.

Source: www.us.macmillan.com/americanbornchinese



COMICS TERMS/GLOSSARY



Writer - The writer writes the story and has the overall vision of how the story will go. They write the dialogue and how the story will progress.

Penciler - Primary artist. This person takes the script and draws the comic. They draw the comic in pencil which then gets inked and colored later on.

Colorist - This person gives the comic color, and add to the weight and vibrancy of the image. The colorist is often responsible for helping set tone and mood via color.

Comics Terms/Glossary

Panels - squares or rectangles that contain a single scene

Gutters - space between panels where the reader infers movement and action between panels

Frame - lines or boxes around a panel(s)

Dialog Balloons - contain character dialogue; communication between/among characters

Thought Balloons - contain a character's thoughts

Captions - contain information about a scene or character

Graphic weight - a term that describes the way some images draw the eye more than others, creating a definite focus using color and shading in various ways



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AMERICAN BORN CHINESE VOCABULARY



Page 8

Diety – a god or god-like being, often the subject of worship.

Page 10

Discipline – a field of study or training, often with strict rules

Thunderous – with great force or a booming sound

Page 11

Steed – a horse, usually majestic and swift

Page 12

Eternity – a seemingly endless amount of time, forever

Page 14

Immortality – never-ending life

Page 20

Chamber – a private room or bedroom

Page 21

Parable – a short story which imparts some kind of lesson or moral

Page 23

Haggle – to bargain or argue over the cost of an item in hopes of meeting a mutually agreed upon price

Page 24

Tuition – money paid to a school, college, or university to cover the costs of an education

Page 25

Ironically – unexpectedly or coincidentally

Page 56

Fervently – with a great deal of passion and dedication

Page 59

Seclusion – hiding or being hidden from view

Page 60

Transcend – to rise above and beyond the limits of the universe

Page 61

Infamous - having a negative reputation

Page 63

Sage – someone who has become wise through training and/or experience



AMERICAN BORN CHINESE VOCABULARY



Page 65

Cudgel – a short stick that can be used as a weapon

Page 71

Muster – collect or assemble

Page 88

Tangible – noticeable by physical senses, particularly touch

Page 105

Stilted – stiff and awkward, unnatural

Page 111

Behoove – to be right or appropriate

Page 123

Jeopardize – to put at risk, endanger

Page 133

Antiquity – the ancient past

Page 134

Fast – to go a long period without eating, usually for religious or socio-political purposes

Page 139

Peril – danger

Page 144

Impudence – rudeness, lack of respect

Page 163

Ethic – a set of principles that guide one's choices

Page 172

Dissipate – dissolve, disappear

Page 214

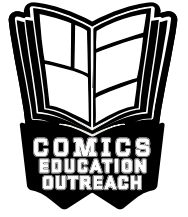
Emissary – a messenger sent on behalf of someone of power or respect

Page 218

Pinnacle – peak or tozpmost, highest, greatest



PRE-READING ACTIVITY



The Monkey King's story was first told in the 16th Century Chinese novel *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en. Of course, reading the entire text of this novel would be unrealistic as some editions number over 2000 pages, but here is some basic information about the novel that would be important to cover with your students:

- It is considered one of the four great classical novels of Chinese history (along with *Water Margin*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber*)
- It is based on historical events but also has a lot of mythology and magic connected to it
- The name of the Monkey King (Sun Wukong) is loosely translated to "awake to emptiness"
- The novel has been adapted in play, film, and even modern dance form (if you haven't seen the Chinese troupe Shen Yun, I highly recommend it!)
- Some scholars believe that the novel was written to criticize the political and cultural traditions of China

Have your students watch the following YouTube video:

How The Monkey King Came To Be - *Journey To The West*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN3_6efimoQ

When it is complete, they will have a good base knowledge of some of the myths behind the novel. Next, have them break into groups and each choose one of the following mythological Chinese entities:

- Ao-Kuang (sometimes spelled Ao-Guang)
- Ao-Jun
- Lao Tzu
- Yama
- The Jade Emperor
- Tze-Yo-Tzuh

In their groups, have students find as much information as they can about each of these gods, including images from paintings and sculptures of each as well as modern representations in popular culture. Have each group make a short presentation on their findings.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. What are your initial impressions of the Monkey King? After reading the introduction to his story (pg. 7-20), what are your predictions for the choices he will make?
2. What is the purpose of the parable that Jin's mother tells him at the start of his story (pg. 23-24) and how does this lesson come to play later in the novel?
3. What kinds of challenges does Jin face as the child of Chinese immigrants? What kinds of challenges do you face each day when you prepare to attend school? (pg. 23-40)
4. On page 48, we are introduced to a very controversial character. Consider the artwork on this page. Consider also how the author expresses the way Chin-Kee speaks. How do you reconcile the arguably offensive character of Chin-Kee in your reading of the novel? Why is he in the book at all?
5. How effective is the "sitcom" format of the story of Danny and Chin-Kee in conveying the author's feelings toward racist stereotypes? To these ends, is the "laugh track" successful in its mission?
6. On pages 57-58, the Monkey King masters eight new disciplines of kung fu. What is his motivation for doing so? Do you feel it is an admirable reason?
7. On page 60, the Monkey King reveals his new form. How is it different from the way he looked before? Why do you think he changed his appearance?
8. How does the concept of changing appearances factor into Jin's story? How and why does he change the way he looks? Are there similarities to what the Monkey King does?
9. On pages 72-79, the Monkey King attempts to run from his creator and interacts with five golden pillars. What do these pillars represent, literally and figuratively? What is the meaning in what the Monkey King does to the pillars before he realizes what they really are?
10. On page 84, The Monkey King is trapped by Tze-yo-Tzuh under a mountain of rock, rendering him unable to use his kung-fu abilities. What do you think he will have to do to escape?
11. Whenever Jin sees Amanda, he experiences some sort of jolt (pg. 169, 178, etc...) What does this represent? Think of a time when you have felt a similar feeling in the presence of someone you had feelings toward.
12. On page 90, there are some visitors to the class. Consider the artwork of the animals and the woman who brought them and what the teacher says. What are we learning on this page?
13. On pages 112-113, Chin-Kee demonstrates aptitude at academics. Why does Danny show increasing frustration and embarrassment by this?
14. When Danny starts to get defensive (pg. 123-130), what sets him off? Why is he really angry?
15. On page 137, when Wong Lai-Tsao is asked why he cares for the ungrateful vagrants every day, he says, "I am no more worthy of love than you, yet Tze-Yo-Tsuh loves me deeply and faithfully, providing for my daily needs. How can I not respond in kind?" Why is this answer enough to impress the high deity's emissaries?
16. The Monkey King's path to escaping his captivity lies in returning to his true self. The same is true of Danny/Jin and the Monkey King's son. Have you ever been tested in such a manner? Was there a time when you needed to be true to yourself in order to move forward?
17. On page 188, Jin tries to kiss Suzy. Why does he do this and why does Wei-Chen consider this such a fierce betrayal?
18. In the final pages of the novel (pg. 201-233), all the stories intersect and the truth is revealed. How did the ending surprise you? Looking back over the earlier parts of the novel, are there any foreshadowing clues that you missed?
19. We learn that the Monkey King finished Wong Lai-Tsao's journey to the west and that it was a test of his virtue. How have you been faced with a test of your virtue? Did you rise to the challenge?
20. When Jin reunites with Wei-Chen on page 229, much has changed for both of them. What do you think lies in their future?



PROJECT #1: CHARACTER ANALYSIS CAROUSEL



This activity can be completed right after the class has finished the book. This is a carousel activity that is done in small groups (4-5 students per).

Obtain large chart paper and hang five of them around the room at regular intervals on the wall. On each of the papers, write the name of a character from the book. Depending on your desired outcome you can choose from the following:

- The Monkey King
- Jin
- Wei Chen
- Suzy Nakamura
- Danny
- Cousin Chin-Kee
- Amelia
- Greg
- Lai-Tsao

Spread students around the room, creating groups at each character “station.” Give each group a specific colored marker and have them write down comments, questions, and observations about the noted character on the paper. After a short period of time has passed (determined by total class time) instruct them to move to the next station clockwise. They then continue the activity, this time adding new comments or making observations on those that have already been written. Repeat this process until each group is back where they started (optionally, you can have them add one more time to the first character station after reviewing all the comments their peers have made).

When that is complete, each group then takes the character that they started with and develops a short presentation based on the feedback written on the paper. They can do this formally as a digital presentation, or informally by leading a class discussion about the character.

NOTE: Alternately, you could use a digital system like Padlet (<https://padlet.com/>) through which students can make comments using their mobile devices.



PROJECT #2: QUOTES, IMAGES, AND MEANING



In this project, students will connect to the narrative and characters of *American Born Chinese* through the images and text of the book.

1. First, give them the handout included below and instruct them to choose three quotes and three images that they feel are particularly meaningful to the narrative, character(s), and/or themselves. They will then note the page number(s) of the quotes and images and explain why they selected them.
2. The next step is to break students into small groups. In these groups, they will share out their responses and listen to those of their peers. Once the discussion has ended, each student will select one quote and one image that they feel represent the strongest of those they have chosen.
3. Now, give each student a sheet of paper or small poster board. On one side, they are to visually represent the quote by drawing their own creative interpretation of the text that explores the significance to the work as a whole.
4. On the other side, students will reproduce the image that they chose either by drawing it themselves, or imprinting a copy of the image on the paper. They will then write a detailed description of the image, taking into account all visual cues from the pictures.

Each student will then present both sides of their work to the class. Grade with the attached rubric or some variation of it.



QUOTES, IMAGES, AND MEANING WORKSHEET



QUOTES/IMAGES

PAGE #

CONNECTION

QUOTES/IMAGES	PAGE #	CONNECTION



	DISTINGUISHED (4)	PROFICIENT (3)	EMERGING (2)	UNACCEPTABLE (1)
INTRODUCTION	Introduction is creatively designed to effectively engage the audience	Introduction is designed to engage the audience	Introduction is attempted but does not engage the audience	Introduction is not evident
ORGANIZATION	Effectively presents information, findings, and supporting evidence so listeners can follow the line of reasoning; organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience	Presents information, findings, and supporting evidence so listeners can follow the line of reasoning; organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	Attempts to present information, findings, and supporting evidence so listeners can follow the line of reasoning; organization, development, and style are somewhat appropriate to task, purpose, and audience	Ineffectively presents information, findings, and supporting evidence so listeners can follow the line of reasoning; organization, development, and style are not appropriate to task, purpose, and audience
DELIVERY	Effectively uses a variety of strategies of address (eye contact, speaking rate, volume)	Uses strategies of address (eye contact, speaking rate, volume)	Limited use of strategies of address (eye contact, speaking rate, volume)	Ineffective use of strategies of address (eye contact, speaking rate, volume)
PRESENTATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS	Effectively adapts speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English, including proper grammar and usage	Adapts speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English, including proper grammar and usage	Limited use of speech for a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English, including proper grammar and usage	Ineffective use of speech for a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English, including proper grammar and usage
VOCABULARY	Effective use of academic and domain-specific words and phrases, and effective clarification of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases	Appropriate use of academic and domain-specific words and phrases, and effective clarification of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases	Limited use of academic and domain-specific words and phrases, and effective clarification of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases	Ineffective use of academic and domain-specific words and phrases, and effective clarification of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases
VISUAL AIDS	Effective strategic use of visual displays to express information and enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and to add interest; effective command of the standard English conventions	Appropriate use of visual displays to express information and enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and to add interest; appropriate command of the standard English conventions	Limited use of visual displays of to express information and enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and to add interest; limited command of the standard English conventions	Ineffective use of visual displays to express information and enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and to add interest; ineffective command of the standard English conventions



GENERAL PROJECT IDEAS FOR VARIOUS CONTENT AREAS



Characterization of Jin/Danny: The characters of Jin and Danny are one in the same. Look at the stories of these two incarnations and create a timeline of his life. Mark important milestones in the character's development. Include specific moments when Jin/Danny interacts with the other characters in the book. Make note of how he develops from the beginning of the novel to the end.

Stereotype/Archetype Project: The character of Chin-Kee is an obvious (and offensive) stereotype of those of Chinese descent. His presence in the novel is meant to both expose the nature and repugnance of passive racism as well as create a test for the character of Jin/Danny. Consider modern popular culture and identify another character that serves a similar purpose in another work. This can be a film, book, graphic novel, music video, etc. Write an analysis of this character in which you identify the text, author, character, and plot. Explore the appearance, mannerisms, and actions of the character and why they are considered offensive. Consider why this character exists and what purpose he/she serves in the work.

Masks Project: In the book, many of the characters alter their appearance in order to attempt to fit in with those around them. The Monkey King becomes taller and stands upright, Jin turns into the blonde-haired Danny, and Wei-Chan disguises himself as a human. In our world, we don't use magic to change how we look, but we do adjust our appearance for one reason or another. Identify the ways that you change your "look" in order to fit in socially. Using thick paper and other materials, create a mask which represents those changes (and any other adjustments you would like to make).

Alteration 1: You can hang these up around the room and ask students to try to match each mask with the person who created it.

Alteration 2: Have students wear the masks and interact. They can ask specific questions like "What is the most significant change you want to make," "Why did you want to change _____," or "What surprises you most about what I have changes?"

Alteration 3: A writing piece can accompany this project in which the student crafts a short reflection on the experience of creating the mask and revisits changes which they have deemed necessary for a successful social existence.

Art Vocabulary: Select (teacher can determine amount) terms from the Comics Terms/Glossary and find 2-3 instances of these terms in action in the book. Explain where it is found, what it is, and how your example works in the book. This can be written, oral, or a group/individual presentation. Images should be shared in some way with the class for discussion.

Mini-Comic Project: Students should research their own family's mythology and create a mini-comic in which they interact with an entity that is the personification of an element of this mythology. This entity can be connected to their national heritage, religious history, or family's individual customs. They may need to spend some time speaking to the elders of their family or researching their lineage and the countries that their ancestors were born.

The three-page comic does not need to tell an entire story; it can be a slice of a bigger story. There is no industry standard for scripting comics for artists, but there are plenty of examples available on-line. Use the text itself as a model for what their comic might look like. Students with familiarity with the graphic novel form might seek inspiration from other sources.

Movie Casting Project: If *American Born Chinese* were going to be a live action film, who would play each of the roles? Have your students cast the "film," write a short treatment of how it might be produced, and create a movie poster for their version of the film. They can choose to directly adapt the film or create something that is based on the story but isn't tethered too strictly to the original plot. They can, for example, choose to focus primarily on the story of the Monkey King or take the perspective of a secondary character like Suzi or Steve. Encourage creativity and thinking outside the box.



PAIRING SUGGESTIONS



The Joy Luck Club (novel) by Amy Tan

– Excerpts could be used from this book (or even the film adaptation) to help explore the cultural clash that Asian immigrants have when assimilating into American schools and culture. Discuss how Jin/Danny and his friends’ struggle to find comfort in a world in which they are constantly reminded that they are the other is similar to the women of the novel and their disconnect with the cultures of their mothers and the challenges of being Chinese-American.

The House on Mango Street (novel) by

Sandra Cisneros – The cultural divide is also on display here within this text but from a Latino perspective. Students can be directed to explore the similarities between Esperanza’s and Jin’s experiences. In addition, there can be a discussion of how differently each protagonist deals with his/her struggles and ultimately resolves these conflicts.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding (film) – This

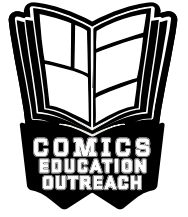
funny film explores the main character’s desire to find love outside of the Greek Orthodox family to which she is inevitably connected. Like Jin, Tula realizes that she cannot change who she is inside, regardless of the physical transformation she makes. Both texts share the ultimate theme that our heritage and our family cannot be adjusted or forgotten because it is innately and undeniably a part of who we are and always will be.

Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return

(graphic novel) by Marjane Satrapi- In the second volume of the now canonical graphic novel text, Marjane explores her experiences as she leaves Iran as a teenager to study in Europe. Her time there allows her to detach from her strict religious and cultural norms and she attempts to blend into the Vienna scene in the mid 1980’s. Again, the idea of trying to detach from one’s cultural and familial roots is on display here. Marjane chooses to return to Iran after having a taste of independence and her realizations can be fodder for great discussion about Jin/Danny.



RELATED RESOURCES



Gene Luen Yang – TedX Talk, December 2, 2016 - www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz4JqAJbxj0

In this Ted Talk, Yang speaks about using comics in the classroom.

Gene Luen Yang – America.gov video - www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYCZqt5WSOM

Yang reflects on cultural identity and American Born Chinese.

Comic Book Legal Defense Fund’s *American Born Chinese* teaching resource guide by Meryl Jaffee -

<http://cbldf.org/2013/07/using-graphic-novels-in-education-american-born-chinese/>

Educator Meryl Jaffee offers a thorough analysis of the book with some suggested activities for teachers.

PBS Interview with Gene Luen Yang - www.pbs.org/newshour/art/this-chinese-american-cartoonist-forces-us-to-face-racist-stereotypes/

This interview marks the 10th anniversary of the book as well as celebrating Yang’s MacArthur award win.

Gene Yang’s as National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature - www.read.gov/cfb/ambassador/

The home page for Yang’s prestigious ambassadorship.

Gene Yang on Stereotypes - www.firstsecondbooks.com/uncategorized/gene_yang_on_st/

In this interview for publisher First Second, Yang explores the character of Chin-Kee and racial stereotypes in general.



Website Landing Information

Reading/maturity level: This text is appropriate for grades 7-12 (ages 13+). It holds a lexile level of GN530L

Themes and Topics Touched Upon:

- Mythology
- Culture
- Family
- Identity
- Relationships
- Racism
- Bullying
- Stereotypes
- Persistence
- Patience
- Wisdom
- Tolerance
- Understanding