

## Tradition vs. Transformation: Ambivalent Immigrant Identity in Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*

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Jin Wang, the protagonist of Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, hates almost everybody around him simply because no one tries to understand him. Yang's portrayal of this Asian-American youth nudges his readers to ponder on the challenges facing minority youths in their efforts to survive in an environment where people with difference feel alienated. Jin is pushed to such an extreme by the unaccommodating school atmosphere that he gradually develops self-hatred. As the tension builds up, he acts like a paranoid and becomes ready to "barter his soul" all for getting an acceptance in the white dominated community. Jin's traumatic experiences and neurotic behaviors raise a number of questions about the life of immigrant children in the United States. How difficult is it to grow up in an alienating environment? Can parents gauge the depth of the trauma their children are going through? Are American schools safe places for children of minority cultural backgrounds? How much do stereotypes about certain cultures and nationals shape people's attitude towards others? This paper will explore these issues focusing on the experiences of immigrant children in the novel.

*American Born Chinese* first published in 2006 won the Michael Printz Award and was also placed on the top ten list of American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults in 2007. Based on his personal experience of growing up as an alien in United States, Yang's protagonist Jin Wang undergoes incredible tension when he is pulled apart by the two equally powerful and mutually exclusive forces of tradition and transformation. Although Jin tries his best to fit into the white-supremacist environment of different schools in California by transforming himself into Danny, his conscience formed of Chinese tradition always haunts and hampers his attempts. In this process, he is often abjected in the classroom, ignored in the library and despised at the playground. Similar are the plights of two more Asian-American immigrant children named Wei Chen and Suzy Nakamura with Taiwanese and Japanese roots respectively. All these minority children apply every possible means for fitting despite tackling other challenges and desires brought forth by their budding adolescence. They even develop phantasy images of themselves, however their efforts to live in an imaginary selves do not lead to personal happiness. Their stories resonate the predicaments of most immigrant children in United States where discrimination in terms of race, class, gender, culture, ethnicity and the country of their origin is still rampant in spite of the government's emphasis on multiculturalism in education.

“Multiculturalism” is an amorphous term that has often intrigued the people in western academia. While no absolute categories and definitions of multicultural literature have emerged, there is an ongoing debate on whether the term refers to international literature, ethnic literature, literature about all “minority” groups in society (including women, gays, and the disabled), or other cross-cultural writings. In *Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults: Reflections on Critical issues*, Mingshui Cai argues that “multicultural literature” should be defined as literature by and about people who are outside the sociopolitical mainstream, especially people of color. Cai writes,

Whether multicultural literature is alien or exotic is not inherent in itself, but rather lies in the perception of the reader. From the perspective of marginalized ethnic groups, this new category of literature is not alien or exotic at all. Instead, it represents their world, reflecting their images and voices. When it is incorporated into the curriculum, children from these groups find character with whom to identify in the books they read in school. (10)

The sociopolitical goal of multiculturalism, according to Cai, is to “[c]hallenge the existing canon by expanding the curriculum to include literature from a wide variety of cultural groups” (59). If we buy into Cai’s categorization, *American Born Chinese* can be taken as a prototype of “multicultural literature.” The novel subtly showcases stereotyping, misrepresentation, intimidation and multiple other problems that Asian-Americans as an ethnic group face while living as “aliens” in America. A review of the graphic novel published in *School Library Journal* says, “It’s tough to talk about today’s most serious issues (such as racial prejudice, self-acceptance, and spirituality) without appearing sanctimonious or sappy,” however graphic artist Gene Yang deftly sidesteps that quicksand in his zippy heartfelt tale of what it means to grow up Asian-American by rising above the possible controversies around misrepresentation and propaganda (66).

Jin Wang goes through an extremely disheartening experience on the very first day in his new school in California. Introducing him to the class, his teacher says, “Class, I’d like us all to give a warm Mayflower Elementary welcome to your new friend Jing Jang!” Only after Jin corrects her, the teacher calls him by his right name “Jin Wang” (Yang 30-31). She commits similar error when she tells the class about where he has come from. “He and his family recently moved to our neighborhood all the way from China!” (30). Even though Jin was born in the United States and has lived there all his life, the teacher does not identify him as an American. He has American accent and has only moved within the same state of California, nonetheless the teacher makes such assumptions without even bothering to ask him personally.

Jin’s experience is very much similar to that of Roland Takaki, a renowned author of third generation Japanese-American background. In “A Different Mirror,” Takaki includes the following conversation with a taxi

driver in Norfolk, Virginia that revealed to him how much race mattered. This happened when Takaki was headed for attending a conference on multiculturalism.

The rareview mirror reflected a white man in his forties. "How long have you been in this country?" he asked. "All my life," I replied, wincing. "I was born in the United States." With a strong southern drawl, he remarked: "I was wondering because your English is excellent!" Then, as I had many times before, I explained: "My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880s. My family has been here, in America, for over a hundred years." He glanced at me in the mirror. Somehow I did not look "American" to him; my eyes and complexion looked foreign. (589)

Like Takaki, Jin Wang has to keep playing his nationality card to assert his American identity. Although he was American by birth and never mentioned whether he had been to China or not, his physical appearance was enough for the teacher to believe that he must have come "all the way from China." She could have been careful enough to pronounce his name correctly and ask about his cultural or national root. Despite being a teacher, she could never imagine the gravity of the impact of such an incident in the psyche of a child. Then, it becomes needless to ask why other children use the stereotypes about East Asians to humiliate him. For instance, Timmy is one of the students in the class who comes up with the statement: "My momma says Chinese people eat dogs" (Yang 31). Likewise, a rumor circulates in the class that Suzy (the other Asian student) and Jin were arranged to be married on her thirteenth birthday. Simply because a boy of similar race has joined the class, Suzy becomes a subject for ridicule among her classmates. Consequently Jin and Suzy try to avoid each other for no other reason.

In fact, Chinese or Japanese identities clearly stamped on their faces make these immigrant children suffer for no fault of their own. In "Growing up Asian in America," Kesaya Noda expresses similar plight she had while growing up:

Sometimes when I was growing up, my identity seemed to hurtle toward me and paste itself right to my face. I felt that way, encountering the stereotypes of my race perpetuated by non-Japanese people (primarily white) who may or may not have had contact with other Japanese in America. 'You don't like cheese, do you?' someone would ask. 'I know your people don't like cheese.' Sometimes questions came making allusions to history. That was another aspect of the identity. . . . I was sometimes addressed or referred to as racially Japanese, sometimes as Japanese-American, and sometimes as an Asian woman. Confusions and distortions abound. (36-37)

Like Noda, neither Jin nor Suzy develop a sense of belonging to the American culture in spite of their American births. Although the immigration

patterns of Japan and China differ, these children of immigrant parents share similar fate due to the misperception from the mainstream people. Noda also comments on such a misperception:

A voice from my childhood says: 'You are other. You are less than. You are unalterably alien.' This voice has its own history. We have indeed been seen as other and alien since the early years of our arrival in the United States. . . . The Japanese fell natural heir to the same anti-Asian prejudice that had arisen against the Chinese. (37)

Yang presents a similar situation when Wei Chen comes to Mayflower Elementary School from Taiwan. The teacher mispronounces his name as "Chei Chen Chun" out of utter carelessness and tells the class that he and his family had "recently moved to our neighborhood all the way from China" (Yang 36). It seems to the mainstream American eyes that anybody with straight hair, flat nose and chinky eyes must be from China or Japan, just like all people coming from South Asia being considered as "Indians." In search of company, Wei Chen tries to befriend Jin while Jin denies it because there has already emerged in him a desire to be viewed as American. He does not want to be further abjected in terms of the company he keeps. He tells Wei Chen, "You're in America. Speak English." This could even be mistaken as intra-racial racism, but the fact is that Jin is simply adopting a survival strategy. Nevertheless, it does not take much longer for these two boys to be friends because they share similar cultural roots and adopt similar survival strategies. In addition, both of them love to play with the toy called "transformer" that can change its form. These instruments and strategies clearly show that the children do not see any other possibility of fitting into the new society except by transforming themselves.

However, these Asian-Americans' efforts to adapt into mainstream American culture do not end the stereotypes attached to their identities. Similar is the fate of many Asian and Asian-American children who are considered as "model minority." Angela-Yeh Kim and J. Christine view that the "model minority" stereotypes attribute educational and economic success to all Asian Americans, with the danger that they ignore "the between-and within-group differences" of assimilation/ acculturation, social, political, economic, and education backgrounds (2). Kim and Christine assert that by focusing on exceptional "success stories" and generalizing it to all Asian Americans, the "model minority" myth does not take into consideration the large number of Asian-American students and their families who suffer from poverty and illiteracy. They write,

Some of the educational stereotypes identify Asian Americans as 'geniuses,' 'overachievers,' 'nerdy,' 'great in math or science,' 'competitive,' 'uninterested in fun,' and '4.0 GPAs'. Some personality and behavior stereotypes assert that Asians are 'submissive,' 'humble,' 'passive,' 'quiet,' 'compliant,' 'obedient,' 'stoic,' 'devious,' 'sneaky,' 'sly,' 'tend to hang out in groups,' 'stay

with their own race,' 'condescend to other races,' and are 'racist,' 'not willing to mesh with American culture,' 'try to be like Americans,' 'want to be Caucasian,' and 'act F.O.B. [fresh off the boat]'. The physical appearance and mannerism stereotypes include 'short,' 'slanted eyes,' 'eyeglass wearing,' 'poor or non-English speaking,' and 'poor communicators'. Stereotypes related to the socioeconomic status of Asian Americans and their attitudes about money identify them as 'stingy,' 'greedy,' 'rich,' 'poor,' 'grocery store owners,' 'dry cleaners,' 'restaurant owners,' and 'chefs'. (8)

Thus, Asian Americans like Jin try to live within the boundaries of the "model minority" stereotype, and as a result perpetuate their behavioral and relationship problems, leaving them to feel isolated and depressed.

What makes Jin more paranoid is Wei Chen's rapid success in adapting to the American environment while Jin is still struggling. Wei Chen initially says, "So? In Taiwan, any boy who loves girls before he is eighteen, everybody laugh at him!" (Yang 89). However, he begins to date Suzy, the Japanese girl, maybe a dream girl for Jin, in no time. Surprisingly, the two boys become good friends as well as archenemies. Wei Chen teaches Jin tricks of proposing and dating girls when the latter is infatuated with Amelia. As he has not been able to transform himself as much as Wei Chen, Jin exacerbates the situation out of nervousness. Jin says, "It made me nervous that someone could have so much power over me without even knowing it" (88). Amelia accepts Jin's proposal to hang out with each other, but Jin fails to promote this relation with the intervention of Chin-Kee, the stereotypical Chinese version of Wei Chen.

In order to portray the conflict building up in Jin's mind, Yang uses the sub-plot of Monkey King Myth. This is also a story about the quest for transformation based on the Chinese story of Monkey King and his journey to the West. In the myth, Monkey King has a mysterious origin in the Flower and Fruit Mountain, attains "enlightenment" through the practice of Kung Fu, and begins to mimic as a god after the humiliation he faces in the Dinner Party of the Deities. Deities disparage him by telling that he could not enter their party without wearing shoes, this arrogant Monkey tries to threaten the gods, including Tze-Yo-Tzuh, the omnipresent creator God in Chinese mythology. He even gives orders to all of his subjects to wear shoes and tries to prove that he is not just a monkey but a Great Sage. Finally, however, he fails to escape from Tze-Yo-Tzuh and gets trapped under a mountain of rocks until he gets rescued by a Buddhist Monk.

With this parallel story of Monkey King who claims to have become a Great Sage, Yang demonstrates the contents of Jin's unconscious. Yang uses the Freudian notion of "metaphoric displacement of unconscious desires" through dream for this purpose. In his dream, Jin breaks his Chinese tradition and transforms into his idealized American image. Jin becomes Danny, a curly-haired teenage hero in a popular American sitcom, and begins dating an

American girl named Melanie. Maybe he was obsessed by the thought of Wei Chen jeopardizing his effort, therefore, the arrival of Chin-Kee spoils everything. Every time Jin is about to assimilate himself with the mainstream culture, Chin-Kee (Jin's "super-ego" in Freudian terms) shatters it with his geeky intervention. In order to escape being haunted by Chin-Kee, which also sounds like the acronym of "Chinese conscience," Jin moves from school to another. Though he has become a real "transformer" as indicated by the Herbalist's Wife, Chin-Kee does not let him alone. He screws up everything which is exemplified by the way he makes his Chinese joke by peeing in Steve's soda bottle. When it becomes too much, Danny attacks Chin-Kee and tries to send him back to China. However, Chin-Kee uses his Kung Fu skills to overpower Danny. Chin-Kee makes it clear that he was actually the emissary of Tze-Yo-Tzuh who had made the journey to the West to save the souls of Chinese immigrants. After the heightened conflict between Jin, now Danny, and his own conscience (or super-ego), in the form of Chin-Kee, Danny's inner self gets finally revealed.

Later, the pathological condition of Jin and his projection of repressed unpleasure gradually surface his actions. Jin gets almost to the point of losing his balance. When he hears what Timmy had told Suzy, he knows that he was not alone facing humiliation. Suzy admits, "Today, when Timmy called me a --- a chink, I realized --- deep down inside --- I kind of feel like that [embarrassed] all the time" (187). At this point, Jin tries to kiss Suzy. It is not clear whether he does so out of empathy, or out of desire for a girl who belongs to his own race. However, there is a clear indication that Jin's reaction is the outburst of his repressed desires. In Freudian reading, it must be the way he "project" his repressed desires. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud argues:

. . . a particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a means of defence against them. This is the *origin of projection*, which is destined to play such a large part in the causation of pathological process. (Emphasis in the original 56)

Freud's argument clearly supports that Suzy had remained in Jin's psyche as a dream girl. Therefore he always hesitated to make advances in developing relationship with girls who were not of his kind. His shy nature appears simply as the cause in the surface, however the main reason he fails to date American girls is that he does not trust them.

Now, questions arise: could Jin ever become "American"? If so why does he try to kiss his friend's girlfriend whom he had tried to avoid initially? It is because he could never have transcended away from his culture. As the Monkey King could never escape from the hold of Tze-Yo-Tzuh, Jin could not move away from his tradition. Just like the Monkey King relieves himself

on the fingers of Tze-Yo-Tzuh, Jin relieves his desire onto Suzy. This is like what Elaine H. Kim says about the impossibility of becoming the other. Kim writes, "What is clear is that we cannot 'become American' without dying of *han* [Korean] unless we think about community in new ways" (613). This quote goes along the line in *American Born Chinese*, when the Herbalist's Wife says, "It's easy to become anything you wish . . . so long as you're willing to forfeit your soul" (29).

While talking about such difficulties facing immigrant children in United States, it is essential to analyze the expectations the immigrant parents make about their kids. Whether the immigrants are from Japan, Korea, Taiwan or any other Asian countries, the parents instill a lot of their own dreams upon their children. These dreams, "deferred" for a long time, make the situation worse. In the novel *A Step from Heaven*, by An Na, a second generation Korean immigrant, we see the image of heavenly America before the family of Young Ju leave their home country.

As the day to leave for America approaches, Uhmma (the Korean mother) convinces her four year old daughter Young Ju to have a "curly-hair-treatment" to make her look like an American girl. When the daughter resists to change her hair style hoping that she wouldn't have to leave home if she remained the way she is, the mother says, "In Mi Gook [America], you can grow up to be anything you want" (An 17). However, Young Ju still insists, "I do not want to be a Mi Gook girl. Let us go before the ahjimmma [woman, here, the hair dresser] comes back." Then the mother says, "We are going to Mi Gook so you can have the very best education. So, someday you will be better than a fisherman's wife. . . Look at my rough hands. Do you think I always had hands like these? Do you want to end up like this" (18)? In this way the Korean parents, troubled by poverty in their homeland, pump the dreams from Korean imaginary into the mind of their daughter in the formative stage of her identity.

The mother's battered hands and their partial economic success after they arrive in California can also be tied to the positive stereotypes about Asian Americans. They are poor, but hardworking. In *American Born Chinese*, this belief in hard work and opportunities in America is also reflected in the story of Jin's mother. Jin says,

My mother once explained to me why she decided to marry my father. "Of all the Ph.D. students at the university, he had the thickest glasses," she said. "Thick glasses meant long hours of studying. Long hours of studying meant a strong work ethic --- A strong work ethic meant a high salary. A high salary meant a good husband --- you can concentrate on your studies now, Jin. Later you can have any girl your want." (Yang 163)

Thus, both the stories speak about the positive stereotypes about Asians and Asian-Americans in the United States. For these hardworking Asians, America appears to be a better place to make a new start. But this

“land of opportunities” turns out like a desert when they realize that the material success does not necessarily bring happiness.

When Jin becomes desperate, he dreams of the old Herbalist’s wife who had once said “It’s easy to become anything you wish . . . so long as you’re willing to forfeit your soul” (Yang 29). Later, when he wakes up with a headache, he finds himself in an American mask. He goes to the bathroom and looks at himself in a new form. Here, as Lacan talks about the forming of one’s self through misrecognition, Jin wants to be called Danny as “A new face deserved new name” (198). Then Jin tries to live with the American self, but it does not last very long.

Although Yang successfully portrays the complex life of the immigrants whose identity formation is continuously affected by being trapped between the two worlds, the root culture and the target culture, he does not propose any model to break the American imaginary. Jin’s identity is a perfect example of such an immigrant self which is trapped between the Chinese roots and American “habitus” as Pierre Bourdieu puts it. Unless the dreams imbedded in the American hegemony is deconstructed, millions of Jins will continue to suffer. Yang’s implicit appeal to transcend the insularity of stereotypes is not enough to resolve the problem. There has to be further emphasis on the study of US imperialism with multicultural approach, both at home (in America) and abroad, which will help unravel the root causes of tension at US homes and schools. In “Taiwan and Club 51: On the Culture of US Imperialism,” Kuan-Hsing Chen argues, “US power is still under-analyzed, at least in Asia. This has something to do with the way post-colonial studies – where one would expect to find critical probing of it – have over-privileged “English” experiences (119). Chen writes,

The study of US imperialism as internal, internalized, and interior cultural forces within Asia is a neglected area of study. It needs to be brought to the forefront of critical debate and even recognition. Without such analysis, the complexity of contemporary cultural subjectivity of “Asian,” in different locales, cannot be properly explained. (112)

Chen’s argument is compelling in that it emphasizes the need for understanding the roots of American hegemony. He asserts that we need to look elsewhere, and further back. “Historically,” Chen adds, “‘America’ as a cultural imaginary has since the mid-nineteenth century never been outside ‘Asia,’ just as ‘Asia’ has never been outside ‘America’” (124). The problems of these immigrants in America have roots in the way its fantasized image is made in Asian countries.

The Monkey King story in *American Born Chinese* also demonstrates the intensity of the problem of “brain drain” in Asian countries caused by the influence of the internationalization of the American imaginary. Just like Monkey King’s departure from the Flower and Fruit Mountain after mastering twelve disciplines, there is a huge tendency of Asians leaving for the West after they get a certain level of education. Due to the positive



stereotypes about Asians, they get better opportunities in the West. Jin's parents are both university graduates, who move to Los Angeles and never return home. They don't have any time to think about the family, culture and country they come from. They don't even keep track of the visitor that comes every year and claims to be their sister's son. Jin's father says to his wife, "Honey, you'd better call your sister and tell her to expect Chin-Kee early!" The mother replies, "My sister? He was your sister's son!" (225). Despite the humor it produces, the situation portrays the mechanical life in America and erosion of faith for tradition among the immigrants. The only positive thing about this is that Yang shows the tradition of welcoming the visitors from home countries whether they are closely related or not. Jin, the American born Chinese, however, can't make sense of this tradition until his encounter with Chin-Kee and the fight between the two that unravels the inner self of both of them.

Chin-Kee is another complex character in the novel. He appears with a typically negative Chinese stereotype with his dress, smile, hair style, and bucktooth. Besides these external features, his intelligence, accent and his jokes are typically Chinese. But his identity becomes clear when Monkey King reveals that he is the father of Jin's friend Wei Chen. He explains, "You misunderstand me Jin. I did not come to punish you. I came to serve as your conscience – as a signpost to your soul" (221). The author also acknowledges that it is not easy to understand the role of Chin-Kee for some teenage readers. In the speech he delivered while receiving Michael L. Printz Award, he said:

My Cousin Chin-Kee character, especially, has the potential to be reduced to nothing more than a YouTube video clip in the mind of the reader. Now, it's okay for you to find him funny, but I want you to laugh at him with a knot in your stomach. Without at least a passing knowledge of Chin-Kee's historical roots, a young reader might not develop that knot. (Yang "Speech" 12)

Nevertheless, through a close reading of the novel, one can't fail to see the connection of Monkey King story, Chin-Kee's regular visit to Jin's family and Monkey King's role as an emissary.

All these dimensions boil down to the conflict between tradition and transformation that immigrants, especially their American born children, are sandwiched between. They can neither detach themselves from the roots, nor can they develop a strong sense of belonging in their new home. Hence, ambivalence becomes their living reality irrespective of the country of their origin and the country of their destination. This reality applies to both those who are forced to leave home as well as those who voluntarily leave home with dreams for better future. In the case of the second or third generation immigrants, they try to evade the side of their identity that comes with their racial or cultural roots. However sooner or later, they realize that they can become happy only by being themselves. In this novel, the young protagonist initially chooses the path of transformation, but this works only until the

mask of his American identity gets shattered by Chin-Kee, the Chinese conscience. The ending of the novel makes the message explicitly clear. By showing Jin and Wei in their original forms meeting in a Chinese café, Yang visually showcases the message that we can be happy only by being ourselves, not by becoming a transformer but by listening to our own conscience.

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