

Argumentative Essay Assignment
Vr293SU20, Prof. Andrew Yang
July 3, 2020

Though all forms of art are arguably an expression of ethnicity, Chinese American literature, by its very title, is such a comment on ethnicity. It argues for ancestral ties, for particular practices as part of its defining traditions, and for particular perspectives and experiences to serve as part of its core history. As Liebkind states on Ethnic Identity Formation, however, ethnicity is **not** a universal expression – it exists in reaction to the expressions and situations created by one’s environment, in particular an environment created by *another* ethnic group. The *importance* of particular expressions of identity can vary over one’s lifetime. Expressions of identity are *political* – they are made in relation to power and status in an environment of limited resources.

In Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese (ABC)*, the protagonist Jin loses his “soul” when he tries to assimilate into mainstream “Caucasian” American culture, but regains it when he realizes, as the Monkey King claims, “who he is.”

For your Argumentative Essay thesis, question and interrogate this claim from *ABC*. Define precisely what is Jin’s “soul,” “who he is.” Does he actually “lose his soul,” or “lose” his identity (who he is) as the graphic novel progresses? Or is his mid-novel transformation actually successful, and the text magically persuades Jin to abandon his transformation part way? Consider the many ways “Chinese American identity” is explored in the text:

- through Jin at the beginning, middle, and end of the text
- Wei-Chen at the beginning and end of the text
- AND possibly Jin’s parents, his childhood friend, the herbalist
- AND possibly Chin-Kee?
- AND Danny?

Be careful with your word choice when making your argument. Provide sufficient, accurate evidence and interpretations to support your claims. Quote and/or describe the text, images, panels/gutters/balloons, etc. by page number. Make sure you *logically* support all your claims; to simply say something “is” may not be sufficient – you’ll need to carefully *interpret* the text, and *explain* your reasoning to *persuade* your readers to accept your understanding of *ABC*.

Make sure you stay *specific* in your scope. **A thesis that is too simple or abstract runs the risk of stereotyping Chinese Americans.** Do not oversimplify identities of “Chinese” and “American.” Consider the following (poor) example: “At the beginning of the graphic novel, Jin is uncomfortable with being Chinese, and prefers to be American, but by the end of the novel he finds it is okay to be Chinese rather than American.”

Make sure your essay has distinct Supporting Arguments for your thesis. Make sure your essay is divided into distinct Body Paragraphs. As a rule, a short paper like this Essay has 1-3 distinct paragraphs to develop each Supporting Argument.

Your essay must take into account the historical and cultural *background* of the text. Consider the multiple stereotypes explored in the text: **the perpetual foreigner, the model minority, ethnic feminization, Asians as similar / interchangeable, mass laborers, economic success, conservatism**, and so on. Especially consider the phenomenon of **Orientalism**, including **self-Orientalism (Occidentalism)**. You can also consider the text as an example of different types of **Ethnic Identity Formation** – ethnic identity achievement, reactive identity, assimilation, and so on. Also keep in mind this text as an expression of **American (national) identity** – how does this text portray, create, or reflect upon various American people. Remember – *all* the people in *ABC* are Americans; the text portrays many *types* of American culture.

I've provided some major points on these topics in lecture; if you use any of them, make sure you cite the *original* source rather than my lecture slides (but if you cite any of my own claims, make sure you do cite from the slides themselves). If you describe anything as “Chinese,” you must locate its “Chinese” identity in time, place, and possibly history or ideology. For example:

WRONG: “Monkey King is a popular character from ancient Chinese tradition.”

BETTER: “Yiwei Chen, in her study of Ming Dynasty novels, describes Cheng'en Wu's Monkey King as a figure of expertise, subversion, and atonement....”

As you cite your sources, make sure you properly introduce them so I can determine their credibility and relevance. You are allowed to use unconventional sources, but you have to justify your choice. For example, an online young adult literature magazine interviewing Gene Luen Yang might have a lot of relevance. But an Elsevier academic study on Shanghai Chinese migration to Australia in 2010 might not (*ABC* was published in 2006, contains no references to Shanghai, and is set in the US, not Australia). You *must* include secondary sources of your own, not just the ones I've provided for class.

Finally, please construct a proper Introduction and Conclusion. Both must contain your Thesis and Supporting Arguments in some legible form.

DUE: *Friday, July 17, 23:59.*

The absolute minimum length for your essay will be FOUR pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman 12pt font. The maximum length is eight pages; the suggested length is 5-6 pages. This length is not strictly enforced; I care more about the quality of your argument. Before your final draft is due, the TA will provide you some resources to help you with your arguments.