

# More Than Meets the "I": Chinese Transnationality in Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*

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According to Benedict Anderson's influential thesis, the development of print-capitalism bears direct relation to the formation of national identity -- of an "imagined community" imagining itself. The critical utility of Anderson's work continues when extended to the contexts of transnational communities as well. This article considers a recent example of such transnational emphasis in Chinese American author/illustrator Gene Luen Yang's 2006 graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*.

Yang's critically-acclaimed work poses a series of questions familiar to scholars and students of nationalism, transnationalism, and identity theory: What are the sorts of challenges and difficulties experienced by a transnation? **In what ways do they affirm, disaffirm, and reshape our ideas of what it means to be part of a transnational community?** And finally, in terms of theory, in what ways may we understand the processes of identity formation for members of these communities? While such inquiries are commonplace, Yang's work is notable in that it attempts to respond plausibly to them through a highly original and accessible re-reading of dynastic Chinese legend. Here, the reader traces the adolescent development of a Chinese American boy, Jin Wang, as he attempts to situate and stabilize his ongoing identity conflicts with the intertextual assistance of the famous Ming Dynasty legend, *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*).

## Re-reading An Old Legend

Yang's recasting of *Journey to the West* focuses on the role of the Monkey King, Sun Wukong. The Monkey King, according to Yang, had been barred from attending a dinner party hosted by the most important of the Chinese gods and goddesses. The doorman prevents the Monkey King from entering the party, however, telling him: **"You may be a king—you may even be a deity – but you are still a monkey"** (Yang 15), provoking the laughter of all the guests present. By Yang's account, the Monkey King left the party embarrassed, spiteful, and suddenly aware that he smelt of monkey fur. Faced with the reality of his primate nature, the Monkey King then set about to transform (*bian*) himself into something other than a monkey. He mastered all sorts of esoteric fighting arts, through which he was able to bully the other gods and goddesses of the Chinese supernatural pantheon. When finally confronted by the Supreme Deity, Ziyoushe, for his crime of self-conceit, the Monkey King is imprisoned

underneath a huge mountain of rock, where he remained for five hundred years.

At this point, Yang's narrative transitions to the modern-day identity struggles of an overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) boy, Jin Wang, within the context of the dynastic Chinese legend *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*). Along with so many children of the 1980s, Jin loves playing with Transformers toys. He longs for the special ability to transform himself into something cool and commanding -- just as his favorite Transformer toy, Optimus Prime, is able to transform back and forth from robot to truck.



Fig. 1. Jin Wang grows up emulating his favorite toys: Transformers. This fascination later re-emerges as a desire to transform himself into a white boy as he reaches adolescence. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second, 2006), 28.

Meanwhile, a subnarrative emerges in Yang's text, which follows the slapstick

vignettes of a European American boy named Danny and his overbearing and crude Chinese cousin, "Chin-Kee." Chin-Kee is drastically bucktoothed, dresses in traditional Chinese clothing, and sports a Qing dynastic hair queue, which is the classic "Chinaman" stereotype.

The flashpoint incident that brings these previously separate episodes of Yang's graphic novel together begins with a confrontation between Jin Wang and his Taiwanese friend, Wei-Chen. Jin Wang, in a fit of anger, calls Wei-Chen an "FOB," to which Wei-Chen responds by striking him in the face. Later that night, after recounting in his mind this unfortunate incident, Jin consciously transforms (*bian*) himself into a white boy. Gazing upon his image for the first time in the mirror, and sufficiently alienated from his former self, he then decides to name himself "Danny." It is at this moment that the theretofore separate narratives of Jin Wang, Danny, and the Monkey King begin to conjoin. Without moving into Lacanian theory, I would simply suggest that Yang's depiction of Jin Wang's process of identity-formation at this point offers a pithy interplay of both the cultural and cognitive factors that operate in the construction of identity.

Danny, however, remains tormented by Chin-Kee's stalker-like presence in his life. Unable to control his frustrations any longer, Danny finally physically attacks Chin-Kee. Chin-Kee, however, manages to subdue Danny with an arsenal of camp kung-fu styled attacks ("Kung Pao Attack!...General Tsao Rooster Punch!" (Yang 208, 210). Danny eventually lands a solid shot of his own, knocking Chin-Kee's head off his shoulders -- and in its place sits the head of the Monkey King, who tells Danny: "Now that I've revealed my true form, perhaps it's time to reveal yours...*Jin Wang*" (Yang 213-214). Danny then physically transforms back into Jin Wang. At this point, the three interwoven narratives of Yang's work fully conjoin. The Monkey King, distilling a Ming Dynasty legend into a practical modern-day transnational solution, tells Jin: "You know, Jin, I would have saved myself from five hundred years' imprisonment beneath a mountain of rock had I only realized how good it is to be a monkey" (Yang 223). The ontological struggle, if not exactly resolved, is at least stabilized, and Jin Wang resolves to apologize to his estranged Taiwanese friend.

Yang places within the text several clues that offer a more nuanced account of the transnational narrative action. These textual hints hinge on the rich ambiguity of Chinese phonetics. Consider, in the first instance, the very name of Danny's cousin -- "Chin-Kee" -- a name that recalls that catchall racial epithet for persons of Asian descent. In the (Mandarin) Chinese language, however, "chin" (亲, "*qin*" in modern *pinyin* romanization) may also mean "blood relation" or "relative." Chin-Kee is, of course, Danny's relative (his cousin, as the story relates). Permitting a linguistic reconstruction, Chin-Kee becomes a *qin*-key to unlock Jin Wang's outward hostility, and inward shame, toward his heritage.

Such transliterative allusions also extend to how Chin-Kee addresses his cousin as "Da-Nee." When homophonically resituated from English into Chinese, "Da-Nee" (*da ni*) may acquire several additional meanings: "Big You" (大你) and "Strike You" (打你). Chin-Kee, in one sense, persists as the marginal Other against which Danny's "Big" Self constructs his (white American) identity. At the narrative's climax, however, Chin-Kee repeatedly strikes Danny (打你) in the face. This physical fight, occasioning that play of meanings encoded within

the name of his Orientalized relation, also extends as a metaphor for the recurrent fight within Jin Wang to accept himself for who he really is -- just as the Monkey King struggled to accept himself as a monkey in dynastic ages past.

Similar to the narrative of Ralph Ellison's African American protagonist in *Invisible Man*, Jin realizes that he cannot rid himself of the historical reality of penetrative stereotypes that would precondition his identity. Chin-Kee, then, functions as a return (he comes from China to visit Jin every year) of Jin's repressed Asian stereotypes about himself. Of course, "Danny" and "Chin-Kee" are later exposed as alter-egos of Jin Wang, the former his idealized American self, and the other his self-consciousness of being Asian. Yang's metonymic play here — Jin Wang's inescapable contiguity to his Chinese heritage, and his internalized desire to fit in with his white classmates — is charming in its carefully structured schizophrenia, with Yang's protagonist/antagonist existing as three very different persons within the same physical body. These variable tensions of Jin Wang's identity quite literally bifurcate him into the extremes of his two relational personas.

The tension to con/trans-form, or to become something other, is the core theme of Yang's work. Jin Wang is a specific example of a young Chinese-American teen coming to terms with the inheritance of his (trans)national identity — negotiating the terms of, in the parlance of contemporary nationalism theory, his personal "discent" (Duara 66). This transformative motif, then, offers a look at how members of transnational communities can confront, re-imagine, and then transform their internalized stereotypes. Yang's work reminds us how the processes and plays of identity formation are often anything but welcomed and uncomplicated (with this especially true for young people).

In this vein, Yang's text also reveals a split perspective on Jin Wang's sexuality. Within the narrative of Danny, cousin Chin-Kee suddenly arrives from China to "visit" just as Danny is about to become romantic with his girlfriend. It is at such moments of heightened sexual tension that the specter of the Oriental Other, embodied by the hypersexualized Chin-Kee, emerges within the text to encompass diametrically opposed generalizations of Asian male sexuality. Thus, while Chin-Kee lecherously ogles Danny's white girlfriend, cooing praises about her "bountiful Amellican bosom" and threatening to bind her feet, Danny merely looks on, horrified but powerless against his "cousin's" outrageous behavior. The effect is immediate and unmistakable: While chauvinistic and lustful on one hand, the Asian male is simultaneously found lacking any substantive masculinity on the other.

Another compelling issue at play here is Yang's treatment of Mainland-Taiwan rivalries within the Chinese transnational diaspora. On Wei-Chen Sun's first introduction to his class (and to the reader), Wei-Chen is quick to correct his teacher's remark that he is from Taiwan -- *not* China. Jin's remark immediately after being introduced to Wei-Chen is that, "something made me want to beat him up" (Yang 36), which even elicits that often belligerent discourse that mainland Chinese political authorities utilize in their approaches to Taiwan-related matters. Approaching the narrative's climax, however, Wei-Chen meets Jin at his doorstep, and in a desperate plea to regain Jin's friendship, Wei-Chen exclaims: "We're brothers, Jin. We're blood." Tellingly, Wei-Chen's word choice recalls the official appeals of many mainland Chinese to



emphasize a shared lineage (*tongbao*, lit., "same placenta") across the Taiwan Strait. Jin (the mainland Chinese) responds by calling Wei-Chen (the Taiwanese) an "F.O.B.," to which Wei-Chen responds by angrily punching Jin in the face. It is a moment encoded in a prescient and systematic reversal of meaning for the discursive relations across the Taiwan Strait.



Fig. 2. Sexualizing the Asian American male subject. Jin Wang's polarized alter-egos, "Chin-Kee" and "Danny," compete for the affections of a young lady. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (First Second, 2006), 50.

That Wei-Chen Sun, moreover, is ultimately revealed to be a direct descendent of the Monkey King as well establishes both a discursive and cultural linkage to his Chinese heritage. As Yang's narrative relates, Ziyouzhe created the Monkey King, who then bore Wei-Chen as one of his many sons -- making Wei-Chen a veritable grandson of the metaphysical center of Chinese legend. It is therefore no accident that Wei-Chen's surname, Sun, is written as a Chinese character that expands its meaning as both "grandson" and the surname of the legendary Monkey King (Sun Wukong). The Monkey King, when finally revealing himself to Jin, says, "I came to serve as your conscience—as a signpost to your soul" (Yang 221). What is interesting here, at the end of Yang's narrative, is the presumption of an ontologically "Chinese" subject waiting to be discovered—and what is remarkable is Jin Wang's seeming discovery of this while only an adolescent.

Yet further questions about Jin Wang should remain. Has he indeed "fully realized" himself, as the narrative's optimistic end would seemingly suggest? Can we confidently ascertain that Jin Wang no longer struggles with issues concerning his heritage (a big leap, given that he is only a teenager at the end of the narrative)? How might he mature into a grown man who, as a transnational subject, strives to maintain such comfort in both his ethnicity and sexuality? On this point, readers would be well-advised to examine Adrian

Tomine's 2007 graphic novel *Shortcomings*, which suggests how those same identity conflicts may continue in their intensifications, albeit in ways more subtly pernicious than schizophrenic streetfights and fratricidal suckerpunches.



Fig. 3. Wei-Chen Sun corrects his teacher's "mistake" -- a statement that he reverses by the narrative's end, where he maintains that he and Jin Wang are in fact "brothers." Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (First Second, 2006), 36.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, Yang's *American Born Chinese* represents a recent effort within the Asian American literary community to situate issues of ethnicity and sexuality within a transnational context. In addressing these concerns, Yang traces the developmental course of a young transnational subject who, thanks to a creative appropriation of Chinese mythology, manages to collapse and

condense the extremes of his personalities. Yang's work is also notable in how it includes the Taiwanese as an element not ancillary but essential to transnational Chinese identity. *American Born Chinese* stands, then, as a work both committedly transnationalist and nationalist.

Such works serve to remind us how identity, while the product of one's life, only arrives via specific historical, linguistic, and cultural constructions. And so we remain with that paradox: Is identity one's possession, or one's possessor? Or, rather: How do we possess our identities, and how do they possess us? Pondering this, we are left with the Andersonian notion of the "imagined community" imagining both its portraits and caricatures alike—critically reading, so to speak, its ABCs.

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