Yiyang Xu

Instructor: Andrew Yang

VR293

July 17, 2020

“Transform” used in *American Born Chinese*

Since the gold rush to present-day society, many Chinese have immigrated into America. Just as many minority groups in the USA, Chinese Americans find this country full of opportunity yet challenging. Due to some political reason such as the Chinese Exclusion Act signed in 1882, together with the social, cultural reason, Chinese American has a long history struggling with racism. It seems easy to list all those oversimplified labels on Chinese American and define "who they are". However, when stepping into Chinese American's shoes, the process of forming self-identification is everything but easy. In the graphic novel, American Born Chinese, Gene Luen Yang provides us an insight into Jin Wang's adolescent development and ethnic identity formation.

American Born Chinese has three intertwined storylines. The core storyline traces Jin Wang's childhood and life in middle school as an American born Chinese. Another one retells the old Chinese legend of Monkey King. The third storyline depicts the story of a white American boy Danny whose life is messed up with the visit of his stereotypical Chinese cousin Chin-Kee. Those three storylines integrate into the major one which is Jin Wang's growth story. **Throughout the novel, the idea of "transform" is conveyed to indicate Jin Wang's adolescent development and his ethnic identity formation, which are not easy and even painful.**

In Jin Wang's development process, "transform" into Danny and Chin-Kee is an implication of the re-imagine of self-identification and internalized stereotypes. The main topic in this graphic novel is the ethnic identity struggle of a Chinese American boy, Jin Wang. The discrimination on him starts since he first came to the Mayflower Elementary School. The atmosphere isn't friendly to him. The teacher not only mispronounced Jin Wang's name and failed to introduce where he came from correctly but also connives the discriminations. When Timmy said that Chinese people eat dogs, instead of stopping this racial discrimination, she promoted this stereotype by replied, "Jin's family probably stopped that sort of thing as soon as they came to the United States" (Yang, 31). At school, Jin Wang is teased and aliened due to his Chinese heritage. However, he still attempts to be accepted by his white American classmates. He starts having sandwiches instead of traditional Chinese food, dumplings that he used to eat. Also, he changes his hairstyle to make it look similar to Greg's. However, all those efforts end up in vain, he still cannot eliminate the stereotypes like "chink" and "geek" labeled on him. As a result, he forms an assimilated identity that is giving up his Chinese ethnic identity and identifies only with the Caucasian American culture (Liebkind, 115).

This situation becomes more tensive in his seventh grade after he fell in love with Amelia Harris, a Caucasian girl. Just like the Monkey King who wants to be accepted as a deity by denying he is a monkey, Jin denies his Chinese identity so much that he even transforms into a different character Danny, a white American boy. However, no matter how hard he denies his Chinese identity, the Chinese heritage is inescapable which makes Jin fear it. As a result, he consciously re-imagines his Chinese identity to be Chin-Kee, a combination of all the racial stereotypes.

Transforming into Danny can be seen as Jin's self-identification and self-expectation, which reflects a feature of Jin's assimilated identity that is only identified with the American identity. The panel on page 194 depicts the "transformation" (變) from Jin Wang to Danny in appearance (Yang). In this process, his hair turns from black to blond; his skin color covert from yellow to fair, and his nose becomes taller. However, the transformation in appearance also leads to Jin's emotional change. His facial expression changes from a compressed lip and frowned to an expression with his eyes and mouth wide open, indicating his mood switches from sad to surprised. Jin is pretty satisfied with his new look and said "A new face deserved a new name. I decided to call myself Danny" (Yang, 198). Jin not only changes his appearance but also gives himself a new name. This scene indicates the character Danny is an idealized self which is created by Jin and served as a re-imagine of Jin's identity.

On the other hand, Jin's assimilate identity has another feature which is denying his Chinese ethnic identity. As a result, the character Chin-Kee is the product of Jin's internalized stereotypes. In this storyline, Chin-Kee is Danny's Chinese cousin who visits him every year and attends school with him, embarrassing him by acting in the stereotypical ways. The character Chin-Kee is the composite of almost all stereotypes on Chinaman by Westerners since the 19th century. Chin-Kee's name is based on a racist term "chinky", he has buck teeth, a Qing Dynasty outfit, and a queue. Chin-Kee contains both historical and modern-society stereotypes which leads to a great conflict with Danny. His appearance and outfit remind of the Fu Manchu which is a stereotypical figure prevailing in the gold rush era. His behaviors also reflect the modern stereotypes, for example, he stands on the library table and sings "She Bangs" (Yang, 203). He sings terribly in a Chinese accent and performs an awkward and embarrassing movement. This scene is referring to William Hung's previous performance using the same song on *American Idol* in 2004 which is criticized by one of the judges, Simon Cowell as “this surprise the century”. Also, Chin-Kee's performance at class shows another stereotype Chinese American is facing in present-day society, academic excellence. He raises his hand confidently to answer almost all subjects namely history, geography, biology, math, and Spanish, showing he is more knowledgeable than Danny's classmates (Yang, 111-113). However, these stereotypes are not created by anyone but Jin himself. At the end of the graphic novel, Chin-Kee reveals to be the Monkey King after the fighting. The Monkey King tells Jin Wang his real intension, that is to "serve as your conscience – As a signpost to your soul" instead of "punishing" (Yang, 221). Therefore, we understand, Chin-Kee is not who Monkey King intended to become, instead, Chin-Kee is the same as Danny, who is also a re-imagine and expectation on one of Jin's multiple ethnic identities. Jin attributed his not being fully accepted by Caucasian American classmates to his inevitable Chinese heritage and forms an assimilated identity. In the novel, Chin-Kee is Danny's exactly opposite which indicates Jin's internalized stereotypes on his Chinese ethnic identity and his idealized expectation on his white American ethnic identity.

However, Gene Luen Yang's American Born Chinese didn't use the idea of "transform" only to trace Jin Wang's formation of an assimilate identity when he is confronted with both white Americans surrounding and Chinese heritage. Yang also uses the idea of "transform" to reveal Jin's re-understanding on his multiple ethnic identifications. At the end of the novel, Chin-Kee and Danny transform back into Monkey King and Jin Wang separately, which implies Jin Wang finally learns to accept and integrate those two identities. At last, Danny cannot withstand the agony and embarrassment due to Chin-Kee's annual visit and a fight finally occurs. During the fight, the background is mostly the lines, flashes of lightning, and sound effects to indicate the terrific conflict. By contrast, the background turns into the bright moonlight and starry night after the fight indicating Jin's mind reduced to peace after the sharp struggle which shows he is more willing to think, learn and accept. This fight reminds of the conflict between Monkey King and Tze-Yo-Tzuh which ended up with Monkey King's failure and be imprisoned beneath the mountain for five hundred years. After that, Monkey King finally recognizes the monkey identity he used to denied and tells Jin "how good it is to be a monkey". Besides, when Chin-Kee reveals to be Monkey King, he changes his height and shape from a human to a monkey. Meanwhile, Danny reveals to be Jin which implies Jin and Monkey King are the same, they both rethink the identities they used to abandoned after they failed to fight with Chin-Kee and Tze-Yo-Tzuh separately.

Therefore, the fight between Danny and Chin-Kee is a recreate of Monkey King's experience. Similar to Jin, Monkey King makes use of his ability to transform into anything but a monkey and beat up whoever insisted he is a monkey, but this attempt fails after being defeated by Tze-Yo-Tzuh which also indicate transforming into another person and denying one's identity cannot make an individual be accepted as the idealized identity that one insists. This ending indicates Jin Wang may also learn from Monkey King and live in peace with his dual identities and integrated them.

In the novel, Jin is not the only one who is able to transform. Comparing to Optimus Prime's transformation, Jin Wang's superficial understanding of the concept of "transform" is a reason for pain during his assimilated identity formation. When Jin first met the herbalist's wife, he expressed he is dreamed of growing up to be a transformer. He shows the Optimus Prime can be transformed between a truck and a robot. At that time, Jin didn't realize the transform of Optimus Prime is not what he exactly he thought. For Optimus Prime, he can transform between a robot or a truck, but he is not simply just a truck or a robot. Instead, he is the integration of these two identities and that is what makes him an Optimus Prime rather than a normal truck or robot, just like the saying goes, "more than meet the eye" (Yang, 28). By contrast, Jin treats the "transformation" more like a total rebuild. The herbalist's wife has already given him the hint and warning of transformation, "It's easy to become anything you wish…… so long as you're willing to forfeit your soul" (Yang, 29). Therefore, when Jin transformed into Danny, he left her warning behind. Psychologist John W. Berry has pointed out that, secure and positive bicultural identity is beneficial for psychological well-being (2006). By comparison, Jin's previous understanding toward transformations falls into a false dichotomy, he downplays his Chinese identity and set it on the opposite of his American identity. This understanding and his separation of the bicultural identity doesn't change others view on him, so that transforming into Danny cannot thoroughly solve the struggle when facing with two identities, and results in pain after transforming into Danny.

In conclusion, Gene Luen Yang's American Born Chinese uses three entwined storylines to trace the process of Jin Wang's ethnic identity formation and adolescent development. Through the form of a graphic novel, Yang uses visible "transform" to amplify Jin's subtle psychological change during this uneasy process. In this novel, the author depicts Jin Wang transforming into Danny and back into Jin again at the end. These two transformations describe Jin forms assimilate identity at first and learn to combine both his Chinese and American identity and forms a multicultural identity that is beneficial for psychological well-being. American Born Chinese reveals the ethnic identity problem Jin Wang met, but more importantly, it implies "How to understand our identity?" is not an easy question many Chinese American adolescents may meet. It is a complicated question since it concerns individual, family, society, and historical factors worth concerning in present-day society.

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