

When the Monkey King Transforms into Chin-Kee: Stereotypes in Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese*

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Gene Luen Yang's award winning *American Born Chinese* artfully weaves stories of three characters into one coming-of-age graphic novel. The realistic character Jin Wang of Taiwanese parents moves from Chinatown to a white suburb and falls in love with a white American girl. The mythological Monkey King who is trained to be a deity but is thrown out of heaven because of his lowly status finally has to come to terms with his identity as a monkey instead of a god. FOB Chin-Kee who is completely a bundle of all the popular stereotypes against Chinese in America visits his cousin Danny every year. The three stories converge when it is revealed in the end that the Monkey King has transformed into Chin-Kee who is Danny's cousin and Jin Wang has transformed into the white American teen Danny who detests the existence of his cousin Chin-Kee very much. Thus, transformation is the key element which adds thematic as well as structure unity to the book.

As a Chinese reader, I feel greatly disturbed by the two transformations, especially the one when the magical Monkey King transforms into the stereotypical figure of Chin-Kee and its metaphorical meaning to Chinese American teens like Jin Wang. I will deal with the loss in the transformation and the great resemblance between Chin-Kee and the image of Chinese in popular magazines more than a century ago. As my paper will not only talk about the narrative but also the graphic art in the book, I will draw on pictures of the Monkey King in Chinese culture and that of Chinese in popular magazines in the late 19th and early 20th century.

In Chinese culture, *Journey to the West* is regarded as one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature and the Monkey King is a household name. Many kids have listened to stories about him from adults or have read cartoon versions of the book. My seven-year-old son Paul who was born in the year of the Monkey has finished four cartoon editions of the story since he began to read at six. Here are some pictures about the Monkey King he has read:



(远方出版社)



(北京少年儿童出版社)



2 山顶上有块仙石。仙石受了天真地秀，日精月华，便有通灵之意。内育仙胞，日久天长，化作一个石猴。



3 那猴在山中，行走跳跃，吃草木，喝山泉，和狼虫虎豹为伴。到了夜间，就睡在山崖下。无拘无束，好不自在。



1 美猴王孙悟空，自从东海龙王那里得了金箍棒回来，一连欢宴了几天。这天，他又邀来六处洞王，大摆酒宴，开怀畅饮，都喝得酩酊大醉。

(河北美术出版社)

In popular Chinese culture, the Monkey King is a cute and smart monkey and a rebellious, powerful and resourceful superhero who never dies and can always turn calamities into blessings. In an TV interview, the actor liuxiaolingtong (六小龄童), who starred the Monkey King in the 1986 CCTV animation series *Journey to the West*, said that in his acting he tried to embody the divinity, the human nature and the animal characteristics of the monkey into one (“集神性、人性和猴性于一身”).¹



(Monkey King starred by 六小龄童)

In Chinese academic circles, the Monkey King and its iconological meaning has always been a heated topic. According to www.cnki.net, the authoritative database which has uploaded papers from most magazines in China since 1979, there have been more than 1,000 papers on the image of Monkey King. Many people see him as a leader of peasant uprisings especially when he declares: “Emperors are made by turn; next year it may be me (92).”² Other opinions range from seeing him as a symbolic supporter of the landlord class in the Ming Dynasty³, an able and talented high-rank subject who is sober-minded about the corruption of the court yet loyal to the monarch,⁴ a hero who desires freedom but is put under control by deities, who is defiant and shows contempt to bigwigs but has to rely on the divine right,⁵ a monster finally ranks among the saints after many hardships,⁶ and to a representative of the

¹ This TV interview was aired years ago and it was about how three generations of the Zhang family has taken acting the Monkey King as their career. I was deeply impressed with how profoundly liuxiaolingtong (六小龄童 or 章金莱) understood the character of the Monkey King. However, I cannot find source about the time and TV channel of it now.

² Wu Cheng-en. *Journey to the West*. Chapter 7.

³ 曹满生, 第 46-56 页。

⁴ 杨绍固, 第62-64页。

⁵ 黄功容, 第 13 页。

⁶ 朱占青, 第 9-12 页。

school of *xinxue* and *xiejin* (心学、心经) in the Ming Dynasty who is able to achieve Buddha-hood through braveness and courage,⁷ to name just a few. And nobody denies that the Monkey King is an iconic hero, whatever compromises he has to make during his journey to the west with the Tang Priest, Pig and Friar Sand.

If the Monkey King in *Journey to the West* travels west to India to obtain sutras (sacred texts) in the Tang Dynasty, the image of Money King travels east to western cultures and becomes very popular in America. Surely people will not miss actors and toys in Monkey King costume and makeup in the Disney World or Disneyland. It will be very interesting to research on the changes of his image in Disney culture. But I will mainly talk about the changes in Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese*. In this book, the Monkey King does not look as cute as that in many Chinese cartoons:



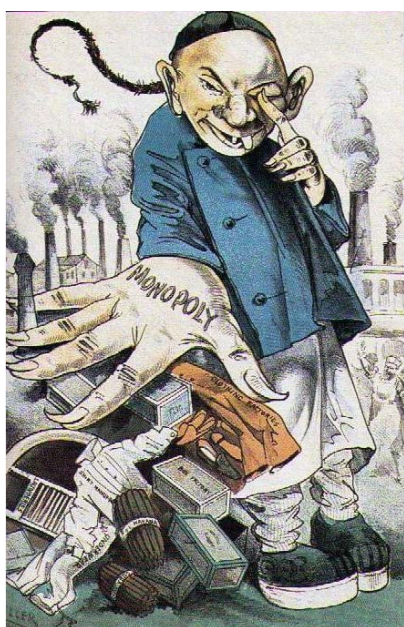
(10-11)

And his rebellious nature is downplayed, while his lowly status and his identity as a monkey are emphasized. He is refused to be admitted into the dinner party of gods, goddesses, and the spirits, because the guard thinks: “You may be a King—you may even be a deity—but you are still a monkey (15).” And these words “thoroughly embarrass” him (15). Then he returns to Flower-Fruit Mountain and finds himself unbearable to the thick smell of monkey fur. So the first episode of his story ends not

⁷杨扬, 第 62-72 页。

with his rebellion but his feeling inferior to the celestial world. In the second episode, he is mainly concerned with convincing the gods of his identity as the Great Sage, Equal of Heaven, but is told by Tze-Yo-Tzuh that he is a silly little monkey and is buried under a mountain of rock for five hundred years. In the third episode, he is rescued by monk Wang Lai-tsao and accompanies him on the journey to the west as a faithful disciple.

Although there are differences here and there from the original version, I do not feel too unhappy with the changes and the loss of his glory and valor so far in the book. What I take issues with is the transformation of the Monkey King into a disgusting figure like Chin-Kee. Admitted that the Monkey King can transform himself into any possible form, which is well-known to the world, I am still shocked and greatly disturbed to find that even in the 21st century Chin-Kee is nothing but a bundle of all the racist stereotypes against Chinese. First, just as Binbin Fu reviewed that “[t]he predominant image of the slit-eyed, pig-tailed, and buck-toothed ‘Heathen Chinese’ that originated from the nineteenth-century cartoon culture has apparently left a lasting imprint on the popular American imagination” (274), Chin-Kee who arrives in the 21st century highly resembles the prevalent images of Chinese in cartoon magazines more than a century ago. Let’s compare the following two pictures. The picture on the left is taken from the Chinese edition of *The Coming Man: 19th Century American Perceptions of the Chinese* edited by Philip P. Choy, Lorraine Dong, and Marlon K. Hom, who collected cartoon pictures from 19th century American popular magazines like *Puck*, *Harper’s Weekly* and *The WASP*. The one on the right is taken from Gene Yang’s *American Born Chinese*.



From *The Coming Man* (56)



From *American Born Chinese* (48)

Readers can easily recognize the same kind of skullcaps, the same slant eyes, buck teeth, and pigtails in the two pictures. And they are also dressed in similar Qing style clothes, with their pants higher than their ankles. From head to toe, the two men look

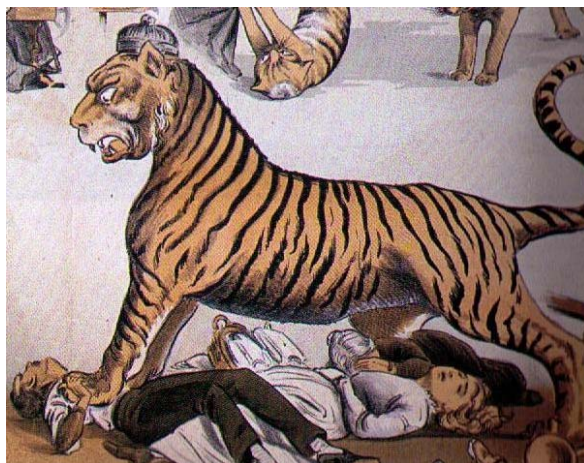
as if they could be twin brothers across space and time for over a century!

Secondly, as an FOB Chin-Kee stereotypically speaks spoken English and quotes from Confucius. He does not shake hands like Americans do but press his palms together in greeting. He is loud, impolite, and sings “she bang, she bang” which drives people crazy. He invariably eats disgusting food, and is called “dog-eaters” by other kids. And one example of this is his lunch of fried cat gizzards with noodles.⁸ In a word, he behaves strangely in the eyes of ABC or Americans kids.

Thirdly, he incarnates the yellow peril and the model minority at the same time. At his first sight of Danny’s white American girlfriend, sexist Chin-Kee covets her beauty and says: “Such pletty Amellican girl wiff bountiful Amellican bosom! Must bind feet and bear Chin-Kee’s children (50)!” The theme of East Asians as “yellow peril” and predators of white women has been a constant theme in the 19th and early 20th century pulp fiction like Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu novels and some popular cartoon magazines. But pictures go deep into people’s mind more immediately than narratives. Here are two examples:



1899 editorial cartoon with caption: "The Yellow Terror in all his glory."⁹



Part of the picture from *The Coming Man* (1975)

Besides his desire for a white American girl just like a toad wishing to eat swan meat, Chin-Kee is also viewed as a potential threat for spreading SARS which afflicted many Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China in 2003.

Contradictorily, the image of Chin-Kee helps perpetuate the stereotype of Asian Americans being whiz in academics. He seems to have ready answers to any questions in class. He beats everyone in math, history, biology, literature, and every other subject in school. But being a successful student does not make him welcome to his cousin Danny and peer students in other races. Instead, they resent his extraordinary performances in class. Stacey J. Lee analyzes in *Unraveling the “Model Minority” Stereotype* how the stereotype of highly achieving Asian students is very harmful to Asian kids. It raises interracial animosity among and hampers friendship

⁸ Interestingly, Stacey J. Lee talked about her investigation in Academic High School in the East Coast in 1989. She noted that some American kids “made fun of the way [Asian food] looked and smelled.” (13)

⁹ From the following website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes_of_East_Asians_in_the_Western_world.

between kids of Asian descent and those from other races in school (92-112).

So it is such stereotypical caricature that the magical Monkey King transforms into. Nothing can indicate his rebellious, powerful, and resourceful previous life, except in the final episode he violently beats his cousin Danny into senses, strips off Danny's disguise and makes him return to his original form of Jin Wang. If the Monkey King finally has to come to terms with his identity of being nobody but a monkey and Jin Wang has to come to terms with his identity being a Chinese American in the racially stratified American society, a Chinese reader familiar with Monkey King the cultural icon find it hard to accept such a humble and lowly transformation. But of course, the book is about the coming-of-age experience of the American born Chinese. Just like the Monkey's being a threatening presence to the mainstream society of the celestials, stereotypes represented by Chin-Kee is also a threat to ABC's efforts to uplift themselves into the mainstream American society. Although looked white, Danny's resentment against no other but Chin-Kee implies an inseparable kinship between the two. His attitude reminds people of ABC Dale's accusation of Steve, a student from China in David Henry Hwang's *FOB*: "F-O-B. Fresh Off the Boat. What words can you think of that characterize the FOB? Clumsy, ugly, greasy FOB. Loud, stupid, four-eyed FOB. Big feet. Horny. Boy FOB are the worst, the...pits. They are the sworn enemies of all ABC—oh, that's 'American Born Chinese.'" (Hwang, 13)

Unlike the Monkey King who transforms into the unwelcome Chin-Kee, Jin Wang is able to transform into a popular white kid named Danny. Born outside the dominant culture into a body and an identity which he wants to escape, Jin Wang is a lonely kid and hardly has any friends in Mayflower Elementary. The other kids laugh at his lunch package of dumplings and call him "Bucktooth." Moreover, he is often bullied at school. No wonder he does not feel happy with his oriental body and face. And he dreams of becoming a transformer when he grows up. Even his toy is a transformer which is a robot in disguise and can transform into a truck or anything. Later when he falls in love with white American girl Amelia, his wish to escape his body and identity becomes all the more overwhelming. With the herbalist's wife's words "It's so easy to become anything you wish... as long as you're willing to forfeit your soul" (29) resonating in his mind, he wakes up one morning and finds himself in a new face. Amazed with this metamorphosis, he gives himself the American name Danny.

Although the transformation is done, he has never successfully got rid of his inferiority complex. He is ashamed of his cousin Chin-Kee and is greatly troubled by the latter's yearly visit. He tries with great efforts to prove he is not like Chin-Kee, yet he is still seen as Chin-Kee's cousin. So he has to switch to a new school every year. When he is with Amelia, he worries about the odor from his armpits. And what is worse, he is forced by a white boy not to date Amelia because of his ethnic identity. So his new appearance does not give him confidence and assure him of his identity in the dominant culture. Psychologically, he is still an oriental and stereotypes represented by Chin-Kee haunts him no end. Thus this graphic novel relates how Chinese American teens like Jin Wang have to negotiate with the stereotypes which

have deeply rooted in the mainstream culture. Just as the Monkey King confesses to Jin Wang in the end, “I came to serve as your conscience— as a signpost to your soul” but not to punish him (221), so all Chinese American kids have to face and deal with such knowledge before they can find their identity.

Although as a Chinese reader I feel disturbed by the magical Monkey King’s transformation into the unpopular Chin-Kee, I understand the image of him is appropriated to the American scene to denote the fight Chinese American kids have to put up before they come to terms with their ethnic identity. In the introduction to a special issue titled “Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narrative,” Derek Parker Royal insightfully points out:

Comics are a composite text made up of words and images that, taken together, can have an impact far different from that produced by more traditional modes of narrative such as the short story or the novel. Much like film, comics rely on a visual language that encourages a more immediate processing time within the reader and, on the level of interpretation, a more "efficient" exchange between author(s) and audience—at least when compared to purely language-based mediums. (7)

Given the profound and long lasting influence of comics or graphic narratives to kids and young adults, I feel more worried and sympathetic about the predicaments Chinese American kids have to face with in their formative years. More than a century has passed, American culture still have not dismissed the negative stereotypes against Chinese or Asians. I am looking forward to a time when the smart and resourceful Monkey King does not need to transform into a pathetic figure like Chin-Kee and graphic narratives about the Other in American culture do not need to rely on reduced caricatures and stereotypes. I hope there will be more positive images in graphic narratives so that minority kids will have nicer self-images and better role models. How long do we have to wait? I think it depends on when the climate of the dominant culture can be changed step by step concerning to the images of ethnic minorities.

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