

## ARTICLE

# Return from exile: Mythology and heritage in *American Born Chinese* and its Disney adaptation

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## Abstract

Though *American Born Chinese* has received a significant degree of scholarly study, the prevalence of cultural exile in the text has not received sufficient attention. Said's theorization on exile provides a guide to examining the mindset of Jin, who willfully accepts exile from his Chinese-American heritage because of how he feels neither truly Chinese nor truly American. Only through a visceral encounter with Chinese mythology does he return from exile and embrace that heritage. The Disney adaptation, though significant from a "representation" standpoint, removes that threat of exile, diluting the narrative into a reassuring, palatable formula.

## KEYWORDS

assimilation, Chinese American, exile, heritage, mythology

In the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (2006), Gene Luen Yang depicts the dilemma of a second-generation Chinese-American adolescent, Jin, who experiences a deep sense of alienation and uncertainty. Though he enjoys an ostensibly comfortable, middle-class life, the other kids view him as fundamentally foreign, fueling his desire to sever his connection to Chinese culture and mythology. The narrative grants his wish for complete exile from his heritage, and he awakens one morning as the white Danny. Yang thoughtfully depicts Jin's desire for such a radical disconnection, but he also depicts this desire as ultimately untenable. He receives visits from an embarrassing Chinese "cousin," who is really a disguised version of Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, from the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. Having suffered similar experiences before visiting Jin, he emphatically convinces Jin to recommit to his true identity. Jin re-forges a connection to Chinese culture through the medium of mythology and leaves behind the persona of Danny. Understanding that being marked as Chinese will inevitably result in a degree

of ostracization, he nonetheless accepts his heritage, and he particularly embraces Chinese mythology, as he understands that this mythology offers him a connection to a rich, vivid tapestry of tales that provide clarity and coherence that endures even despite the distractions and painful experiences of life. Reforging a link with that mythos means seeing the problems and experiences of the individual self as belonging to an interlinked whole, restoring a lost sense of harmony and meaning. Jin chooses that mythology, not simply as an accident of his birth, but proactively and willfully.

In crafting a modern fable that so viscerally contemplates exile and alienation, Yang echoes the ideas of the critic Edward Said. In his "Reflections on Life in Exile," he defines exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and its native place, between the self and its true home."<sup>1</sup> Said implies that harmony emerges from the relation between self and environment, and as such, separation occurs as an irreparable psychic wound. The self draws succor and nourishment from the environment that shaped it, and without that environment, the self will starve from

For Asian American Pop Culture Issue.

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isolation. Yang constructs the psychological weight of exile in similar terms, even though the practical situation Jin faces differs significantly from the kind of exile Said describes. Jin actively seeks permanent exile from his Chinese identity because he already feels isolated from both American culture and Chinese culture.

The differences that exist between Jin and the other boys at school cause him to yearn to be part of a monocultural majority and not an outsider in a multicultural society. Nonetheless, he and Yang ultimately accept what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah views as the imperative of cosmopolitanism, that being “the recognition that human beings are different and that we can learn from each other’s differences.”<sup>2</sup> Accepting these differences as an opportunity for curiosity and growth, instead of a cause for shame, can be difficult for individuals scorned for their differences from the “norm,” but Appiah stresses the necessity for individuals to accept this difficulty. Jin eventually understands that, despite what bullies and patronizing teachers may insist, he can reconcile being fully American with fully retaining a connection to the mythos and customs of China. The critic Matthew Arnold, while linking national flourishing to cultural enrichment, lambasts those who congratulate themselves on belonging to “the best breed in the whole world,” their racial-supremacist rhetoric creating “a sphere in which spiritual progress is impossible” and everything “ideal and refining will be lost out of sight.”<sup>3</sup> Yang emphasizes the challenge of retaining cultural ties in a world beset by myopia and judgmental callousness, one where ignorant boys mock Jin by saying things like “Let’s leave Bucktooth alone so he can enjoy Lassie.”<sup>4</sup> Such a comment refers to two different derogatory Chinese stereotypes: one that people from China have overly large front teeth, or “buckteeth,” and the other that they consume dog-meat. By grounding his narrative in *Journey to the West*, however, Yang demonstrates how omnipresent that challenge is in Chinese storytelling, positioning Jin’s narrative within that tradition while transforming that tradition through resituating it in contemporary America.

## 1 | THE CRISIS OF EXILE

As a condition, exile posits a separation between a familiar place, a home or refuge no longer accessible, and a foreign space from which the individual experiences alienation. Exile in mythology and religion can exude a romantic grandeur, indicating a severance from home necessary for the accomplishment of greater deeds in the future. Examples of this kind include the flight of Aeneas from the burning ruins of Troy and the exodus of Moses and the Israelites from

Egypt. For Said, the heroic, archetypal narrative of exile unfortunately overshadows the personal isolation and existential malaise inflicted by such a separation. He writes that exile “is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience.”<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Arnold views exile more positively. While he acknowledges it as a melancholy rupture from cohesion and familiarity, he ultimately views the wreckage it creates as an opportunity. The exile, no longer tied to a specific set of customs and practical obligations, can for Arnold more freely criticize all sides and all parties. Arnold demonstrates this viewpoint most vividly in *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*. The broadened mind, capable of freely and curiously understanding a variety of perspectives and ideologies, compensates for the exile’s lost sense of certainty and clarity. *American Born Chinese* views exile as an unnatural deracination of the self, as Said suggests, while also viewing it as a potential step in the journey toward maturation and enlightenment, in the Arnoldian sense. Jin seeks complete exile from his Chinese heritage, paradoxically, because he seeks a home. He experiences isolation from both American culture and traditional Chinese culture and believes he can only find peace if he destroys one side of himself. The endpoint of this harrowing journey of self-destruction is, ultimately, self-discovery, the full acceptance of Chinese culture and especially *Journey to the West* not as uncomfortable and useless burdens but as wellsprings of connection and community that are relevant to his experience in the world.

*Journey to the West* is a towering, sprawling novel that occupies a similar place in the Chinese literary imagination as, for instance, King Arthur legends have in the literary imagination of the United Kingdom. It developed from a variety of sources, history, and legend and oral tradition, while articulating a distinctive vision of an adventure from China to India to retrieve sacred Buddhist texts. The central pilgrim is Tang Sanzang, inspired closely by the Tang-dynasty monk Xuanzang, but arguably the most well-known and beloved character from the text is the intelligent but reckless Sun Wukong. Though violent and irascible, Sun Wukong finds meaning and harmony through aiding Tang Sanzang, and they both achieve enlightenment. Yang’s original graphic novel has significance in its transnational perspective on *Journey to the West* and how that significance can heal the rift in a “split,” isolated identity. Jin gradually understands the similarities between the Monkey King’s identity struggle and his own: in both cases, attempting to escape from one’s true self only causes psychological hardship. Disney adapted *American Born Chinese* into a television show for its streaming service Disney+ in 2023, but while the show still appreciates Chinese culture and *Journey to the West*, it removes the existential alienation and self-loathing that affect Jin in the graphic novel. Its

references to *Journey to the West* function only as elaborate settings and bombastic action sequences, and as a result, its perspective on transnational storytelling is limited and anodyne, twisting the narrative into hackneyed and sugary Disney conventions. These failures, however, serve to clarify how the original graphic novel successfully uses the framework of *Journey to the West* to facilitate Jin's reconnection with Chinese culture and mythology, as overtly different as old legends may seem from the anxious life of a Chinese-American teenager in California.

## 2 | “STILL A MONKEY” IN ANCIENT CHINA AND MODERN CALIFORNIA

Yang depicts Sun Wukong as longing to join the feast of the gods, only for a guard to condemn him, saying, “You haven’t any shoes,” and “You may be a king—you may even be a deity—but you are still a monkey” (14–15). In *American Born Chinese*, the alienation Jin faces is only a more modern version of that experienced by Sun Wukong. Jin has no “home” society to which he can return, even in his imagination, and thus he experiences a remove from both American culture and Chinese culture. Yang illustrates this contrast through the interactions between Jin and the relatively comfortable Taiwanese immigrant Wei-Chen Sun. Though Wei-Chen is secretly the son of Sun Wukong, Jin views him as exactly the kind of “fresh off the boat” immigrant that he wants to avoid. Jin admits that “something made me want to beat him up” (36). This “something” relates to Jin's shame at being seen as similar to the overtly “foreign” Wei-Chen, but it more implicitly relates to Jin's envy at Wei-Chen's lack of self-consciousness. When Jin falls for the white, blonde Amelia, his anxiety prevents him from talking to her, and Wei-Chen playfully calls him a “cowardly little turtle” before encouraging him to pursue Amelia (94). Wei-Chen, grounded in Chinese culture, feels a level of contentment that eludes Jin, who constantly feels isolated. He experiences the alienation of being treated like a foreigner in the country of his birth, while also feeling isolated from the country of his heritage.

Scholars of Asian American culture have long criticized the persistent idea of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners.” Frank Wu argues that this perception and accompanying questions like “Where are you really from?” function to “just about define the Asian American experience,” arguing that through this perception, Asian Americans “are figuratively and even literally returned to Asia and ejected from America.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Sapna Cheryan and Benoit Monin discuss the disquieting effect such a concept can have on Asian Americans, who are “reminded again and again that a core identity of theirs is at best questioned, at worst

denied.”<sup>6</sup> Unable to feel fully at home in his own country, Jin experiences a sense of perpetual exile. An elementary school teacher mispronounces his name as “Jing Jang” and wrongly states that his family “recently moved to our neighborhood all the way from China” (30). In reality, he lived in San Francisco his entire life before moving to his new neighborhood and school. This perception of not “actually” being American does not have the overt force to deny him housing or professional opportunities, but its influence is more insidious. He cannot escape from it, and no actions available to him can alleviate its presence. The equality he experiences is merely legal and statutory, and does not allow him to participate in social life as a “full” citizen. This isolation wounds him most explicitly in the case of Amelia. When he finally asks Amelia out on a date, she agrees, and he explodes with rapture, saying that her response “kept me warm for the rest of the night” (106). This excitement does not last. Although the date goes well, Amelia's friend Greg asks him to stop pursuing her, arguing that she “has to start paying attention to who she hangs out with” (179). Sharply stung, Jin nonetheless acquiesces. Yang leaves ambiguous whether Greg intended such a comment racially, but Jin experiences it as such nonetheless. He views it as a particularly vivid example of how society treats him often cordially but never equally.

The Amelia episode paralyzes him in two ways: it creates a barrier between him and American culture, preventing him from feeling like that culture can ever truly be his, but it also discourages him from pursuing a closer connection to Chinese culture. He attempts to drown his link to that culture and its mythology. His self-loathing culminates in the willful destruction of his identity as Jin, as he transforms into Danny. When he was younger, the Chinese herbalist his mother visited said, “It's possible to become anything you wish, so long as you're willing to forfeit your soul” (29). His humiliation over losing Amelia intensifies his malaise, leading to such a profound sense of psychic fragmentation that he decides to make that devilish bargain. Smiling at his transformation, he declares that a “new face deserved a new name,” and so “I decided to call myself Danny” (198). This complete exile from his genuine self is a kind of anti-exile, as it provides a chance to become accepted as American. Yet while *American Born Chinese* understands the desire for this kind of transformation, it views that desire as impossible. Attempting to suppress his connection to Chinese culture only transforms it into a grotesque parody. Yang intentionally models Danny's “cousin,” hideously named Chin-Kee, after grotesque “Yellow Peril” stereotypes, with sallow skin and heavily slanted eyes and the queue of a Qing-dynasty mandarin. In confronting the audience with an exaggerated version of anti-Asian stereotypes, he demonstrates the prevalence of these stereotypes in subtler forms in the

modern age. *Yellow Peril: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*, edited by John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats, comprehensively delineates the history and unease behind “Yellow Peril” stereotypes, which started with the surge of Chinese laborers immigrating to America in the mid-19th century.<sup>7</sup> Yet for Yang, that stereotype still exists, in subtler forms, and he laments that “because it’s not wearing a queue we don’t recognize it as coming from the same source.”<sup>8</sup>

Practically speaking, the appearance of Danny’s “cousin” represents the incapacity for him to claim the assimilation he desires, preventing the frictionless existence he idealizes. The rude and ghastly behavior of the “cousin” destroys Danny’s social life. Danny disdains Chin-Kee for “talking his stupid talk and eating his stupid food” (127). His opposition to his Chinese heritage, his view of it as a burden to shed, does not disappear after his transformation into Danny. Rather, his actions transform it from an internal burden to an external one. His perceptions shape his realities in a way that does not improve his existence. Because he perceives his Asian identity as monstrous baggage, it fits that caricature. He remains in a position of self-exile, one influenced by societal discrimination but solidified by his own choices, until he makes the choice to reconnect with his heritage and mythology. Sun Wukong adopts the guise of Danny’s outrageous cousin, but at the graphic novel’s end, the Monkey King reveals that his intention was not to punish Danny for rejecting his heritage. Instead, he declares, “I came to serve as your conscience—as a signpost to your soul” (221). Referring to his own desperate attempts to escape from his personal identity, he declares that he could have saved himself centuries of imprisonment “had I only realized how good it is to be a monkey” (223). Jin renounces his identity as Danny and re-incorporates his Chinese heritage as part of himself, instead of seeing it as a monstrous, parasitic burden.

### 3 | THE DEFANGED DISNEY ADAPTATION

The Disney adaptation (2023), by excluding the Danny scenes, erodes the idea of returning from this interstitial, void-like state to a place of understanding and acceptance. To its credit, the Disney version celebrates Chinese culture and mythology. As Nguyen Le writes in *The Playlist*, the show provides “effective affirmations,” and that in these affirmations “those of Asian descent today, and tomorrow, find more reason to kick off parades than to come to pauses.”<sup>9</sup> The show’s creator, the actor and writer Kelvin Yu, has a deep respect for the connection the source material draws between the legends of the Chinese past and the experiences of Chinese Americans in the present. Both versions view the Chinese-American identity as fraught and express

sympathy with the desire to reject it but nonetheless assert that the richness of Chinese heritage has value for the present, and that accepting it provides grounding and coherence. The Disney version even expands on the original somewhat. It includes Ke Huy Quan, who starred in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, and it introduces lush new worlds and characters inspired by Chinese legend. One of these figures is Guanyin, played by Quan’s former *Everything Everywhere* costar Michelle Yeoh. A revered Buddhist figure known as the bodhisattva of compassion, Guanyin serves as a somewhat sardonic guide and mentor to Jin.

Nevertheless, the Disney version downplays his desire for the oblivion and annihilation of his heritage. As such, it fails to emphasize the ethos of choosing to return from exile. It does not sufficiently spotlight his temptation to disconnect from his culture, and so his eventual decision to reconnect to it appears overly simplistic. As Angie Han writes in an otherwise positive review, the adaptation “turns what once felt like a personal story with potent metaphorical flourishes into something more like a superhero saga.”<sup>10</sup> It fits into what Richard Schickel famously and derisively called “the Disney version” of existing stories. Schickel writes that this ethos values the “politics of nostalgia,” following Walt Disney’s desire to “wall himself off from the affairs of nations and governments, the better to tend his own garden in his own fussy style.”<sup>11</sup> In the years since Schickel, this variety of academic critique, portraying Disney as a factory for the standardization of robust and mysterious tales into a sterile, sentimental, and safe mold. Jack Zipes articulates the most vociferous version of this argument when he claims that Walt Disney was “a nefarious wizard of some kind whose domination of the fairy tale should be lamented.”<sup>12</sup> Janet Wasko contemplates Disney’s commercialist transmutation of fairy tales with more nuance in her *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. This book is particularly valuable for its critical but balanced assessment of the Disney brand, simply analyzing how Disney constructs an idyll of reassurance, serenity, and clarity, then efficiently commodifies that wonderland, distributing it to a tense and uncertain world.<sup>13</sup> The Disney version of *American Born Chinese* resembles Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (1989) or *Beauty and the Beast* (1991): all these stories radiate a deep affection for their source material while simultaneously excising the darker elements of that source material to create a reassuring, sweetly tender story that is palatable for mass consumption. In his definitive, ambivalent biography of Walt Disney, Neal Gabler argues that Disney perfectly cultivated “the promise of a perfect world that conforms to our wishes.”<sup>14</sup>

Even as the Disney adaptation attests to its appreciation for Yang’s original work, it softens both Jin’s disdain toward Chinese culture and the alienation

that facilitates that disdain. Jin does not, in his bitterness, desire exile from his Chinese heritage, and as such, his eventual embrace of Chinese mythology appears inevitable and routine. In the context of the Disney monoculture, which envisions a utopia of multiculturalism without cultural friction, the conflict between Chinese mythology and American culture can only seem supercilious, as Disney subsumes both into its international brand. Yang's original does not position Chinese heritage and the mundane American present as innately oppositional, and it mocks the narrow insularity of those who believe their norms and expectations are the only legitimate "American" ones. Yet it explores the apparent contrast between the two that exists in the minds of both Jin and the children who bully him. This divide even exists in subtler forms, such when a teacher "defends" him against a comment that his family eats dogs, saying the family "probably stopped doing that sort of thing as soon as they came to the United States" (31). Distinctly uncomfortable, he accepts this dichotomy between China and America. He accepts the conception of having to choose between cultures. As he lives in an American community where he encounters only a few other Asian kids his age, he desires to choose America and destroy his Chinese identity. For Yang, such a division is impossible. The tension of the Danny storyline gradually transforms it from a naïve form of wish-fulfillment to a fantastical, elevated depiction of the impossibility of fully rejecting a culture. In an interview, Yang argues about the tempting impossibility, particularly as an adolescent, of achieving distance from one's culture. He says: "that culture is in you, it's a part of who you are, it speaks to your subconscious and affects your decisions. You can't get away from it, no matter how hard you try."<sup>15</sup>

#### 4 | THE VALUE OF MYTHOLOGY

For Yang, the falseness of this separation exists on an individual level but also on a societal level. In a different interview, he discusses how what makes "Jin an outsider, even if you come from another background, you'll be able to relate. The themes explored are true for anybody who has ever felt like an outsider."<sup>16</sup> This is not only about demonstrating the broader appeal of the show, but something a bit more subtle. It functions as an acknowledgment of how stories of outsiders attempting to develop a sense of self in an uncertain, hostile world is not opposed to American storytelling. Rather, such ideas are cornerstones of American literature. Yang discusses one of the seminal books for him was Richard Wright's searing memoir *Black Boy*, and how he "ended high school on a Richard Wright kick and did my senior paper on *The Native Son*."<sup>15</sup> American literature, from this viewpoint, is not

opposed to the stories of outsiders experiencing discrimination and ostracization. Rather, these stories characterize American literature and culture. As Appiah writes in a discussion of the Victorian explorer Richard Burton, "you will find parts of the truth (along with much error) everywhere and the whole truth nowhere."<sup>2</sup> Multiculturalism in this context does not mean the negation of "American literature" as an idea, but simply the notion that American literature does not mean prioritizing one perspective while viewing others as foreign. Rather, American literature is a jumbled mass of stories about cultural alienation that, at their best, contain important fragments of understanding. A distinct connection to Chinese mythology and heritage, for Yang, does not exclude belonging to the greater fabric of American society. Admittedly, Yang in *American Born Chinese* is not over-idealistic about this vision. He understands that enduring the perception of being a perpetual outsider creates a profound sense of alienation, particularly for adolescents already struggling with existential insecurities. Yet he insists that maintaining a connection with Chinese culture is preferable to a futile attempt to obliterate that cultural connection. The narrative ultimately agrees with Sun Wukong about "how good it is to be a monkey," to humbly and thoughtfully accept one's true identity instead of hiding behind a façade.

Comprehending this perspective requires confronting a deep sense of shame and alienation regarding his Chinese heritage, which he views as a burden. Unlike his parents or Wei-Chen, he feels no closeness to Chinese culture, and he experiences it only as an obstacle that marks him as "different" or "strange" to the other kids. While mythology is not the only marker of Chinese culture, it has a special value as a signifier. Far from merely being dusty and burdensome, Chinese mythology has a richness that extends beyond the habits of ordinary life. It presents a portal to another world, lush and more laden with meaning and significance. The Disney adaptation, with its indulgent and florid depictions of Chinese deities and otherworldly locations, serves as a straightforward paean to that mythology. Yet Yang's focus is more targeted than simply encouraging the celebration of Chinese mythology. More than any other element of Chinese culture, mythology posits the self as belonging to a larger, harmonious tapestry of wonder and community. Regarding the necessity of preserving endangered tales, the Grimm Brothers compared these tales to crops that have survived "a storm or some other calamity," and they praise the humble places that have protected these stories: "the places by the stove, the hearth in the kitchen, attic stairs, holidays still celebrated, meadows and forests in their solitude, and above all the untrammelled imagination."<sup>17</sup> The storm the Grimms feared was that of industrialized society devastating existing conceptions of folklore and community through

its monomaniac obsession with efficiency and profit. In *American Born Chinese*, the storm is more that of a judgmental country that only appreciates the known and familiar, implicitly suppressing the stories and customs of other cultures by branding them as strange or backward. Chinese mythology, in providing a network of stories laden with psychological and philosophical meaning, alleviates the alienation created by such a storm.

Food, customs, and even the speaking of Chinese can have a similar, ritualized value, but this value is often furtive. Ritual relies on objects and behavior possessing a significance outside of their external, obvious value. In mythology, this relevance glows more radiantly, as seemingly ordinary creatures like monkeys become avatars for passion, foolishness, and guile. The character of Sun Wukong specifically creates a connection to a narrative told and retold throughout the generations, thus forming a rich link between present and past. By contrast, the ritual value of Chinese food and customs as part of a cohesive cultural fabric is less readily apparent, especially for an insecure teenager, and Jin understands the value of these parts of Chinese heritage only after he has already reconnected with Chinese myth. Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, discusses ritual as being what “focuses attention by framing,” and thus it “enlivens the memory and links the present with the relevant past.”<sup>18</sup> The practice of ritual, for Douglas, shapes and transforms experience. It creates the experience of meaning, in the sense that it attunes the mind to perceptions that otherwise remain occluded and vague. In discussing the prevalence of ritual even in modernity, Douglas writes that “we must treat the spring millinery and spring cleaning in our own towns as renewal rites which focus and control experience as much as Swazi first fruit rituals.”<sup>18</sup> Rituals, from this perspective, have significance less for their overt, superficial content than for the latent experience that they create. While the superficial value of spring cleaning derives from its practical and hygienic value, its more profound and ritualistic value derives from the experiential creation of cohesion and clarity. In mythology, that ritual significance is much more apparent. Superficially, myths appear simply as old, strange stories, but they endure because they lucidly convey moral and psychological truths with an intensity and depth absent from mundane life.

Evoking the cohesion and wisdom of myth to heal an environment marred by turmoil long predates Yang. Arthurian myth appealed to writers of Victorian Britain for much the same reason. That society was one stricken by the disorienting upheaval of industrialization, as old ideas of connection and cohesion faded in a commercial environment singularly obsessed with utilitarian efficiency. From the luxuriantly vivid pictorial renderings of Pre-Raphaelites like Edward Burne-

Jones to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's ambivalently elegiac poem *The Idylls of the King*, artists and writers reconsidered Arthurian legend, contemplating what those stories could mean for their own era. As Stephanie L. Barczewski asserts, the widespread appeal of these legends attests to both “a protest against modernity” and a desire to transcend nostalgic sentimentalizing and instead “address a number of contemporary dilemmas,” as thinkers searched for “solutions to the problems plaguing Victorian society.”<sup>19</sup> Appealing to these myths thus did not simply mean reveling in the nostalgic desire to avoid the chaos of a challenging age. Mythology for these adapters functioned as revelation and reconnection, not as superstitious concealment. For Yang, Chinese mythology has a similar significance. An earnestly mythological framework foregrounds the hidden capacity for experiences to have more significance than superficial appearance reveals. Mythology operates on two levels of meaning: one overt and bizarre, the other latent and philosophical. Returning to mythology for Yang has the ritualized quality of revealing a sense of connection and community formerly obscured by the appearances of a world that seems isolated and divided. He summons and reinterprets *Journey to the West* to serve as glue for the fractured life of a Chinese American. Regarding the presence of *Journey to the West* in his work, Yang asserts that “after seeing so many brilliantly done straight adaptations in Asia I felt that I had to do something that none of those Asian artists could do,” which was to “use the story to talk about the Asian American experience.”<sup>8</sup>

## 5 | REINTERPRETING JOURNEY TO THE WEST

A national myth, like Arthurian legend in England or *Journey to the West* in China, provides a common fabric uniting a group of people through a shared understanding beyond the practical necessities of everyday life. They provide a world laden with harmony and significance of the kind often difficult to achieve among the distractions of a convoluted world. Turning to this mosaic of stories, so saturated with philosophical and spiritual meaning, intensely evokes the clarity and cleaning that Douglas views as the essence of ritual. Immersing the self in this network of enchanted tales, revitalized through every generation that hears them, ameliorates isolation and creates a sense of meaningful connection and cohesion. That mythologies have specific value or resonance for one nation does not mean they have no significance outside that nation. King Arthur's legends, though distinctly British in their setting and context, have long extended their influence beyond the British Isles, from French medieval romances to Wagnerian opera to Mark Twain's *A*

*Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Applying a similar framework to *Journey of the West* makes sense. The story is a distinctly Chinese myth and has specific relevance within a Chinese context, but it also has relevance for everyone who seriously cares for the myth. Capacious, it retains its identity even with the introduction of non-Chinese elements, such as the Catholic influences Yang includes. While a fully comprehensive discussion of *Journey to the West* exceeds the scope of this article, the work attained a sacred, philosophical resonance during the centuries after its initial publication in the Ming Dynasty, likely by Wu Cheng'en. As Xuan Wang asserts, centuries of reverent and thoughtful interpretations of the text helped to elevate and transform it into "something mysterious, unfathomable, sacred, yet enormously intriguing."<sup>20</sup> As such, it held profound relevance for centuries of readers as "the confirmation of their faith, for their own ladders to the ultimate Good."<sup>20</sup> What is important to *American Born Chinese* is how Yang crafts his own conception of *Journey to the West*, based on how he first experienced the stories through his Roman Catholic upbringing.

That he transforms these stories does not mean he negates or undermines them. The narrative in its current form came from Wu Cheng'en, but elements of the story existed much earlier. Depicting a mythologized version of the monk Xuanzang's attempts to bring Buddhist texts to China from India, the tale in its most rudimentary iterations spread throughout China over the course of centuries before taking its modern, familiar form. Many English children who never read Thomas Malory's 15th-century *Le Morte D'Arthur*, which codified Arthurian legend for the generations that followed, or Tennyson's *Idylls* nonetheless have a conception of who Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenevere are, and in the same way, many Chinese children learned the story of *Journey to the West* from parents or relatives without reading the original text. The relief and harmony that myth provides in opposition to the confusion of a chaotic world endure, but what specific form the myth takes inevitably depends on the telling. As the folklorist Maria Tatar writes, the magic of tales "derives from their mutability," and "there is really no conflict between preserving traditions and creating them anew."<sup>21</sup> The essence of the myth and the expansion of perspective it provides remain regardless of what specific forms of the legend perpetuate. That essence endures even if a Buddhist legend develops Catholic characteristics and even if Yang relates it in English instead of Chinese. Myth has the function of curing loneliness and restoring a sense of purposeful connection, revealing the individual life to belong to a larger, harmonious existence. Beyond the initially quotidian and even uncomfortable facts of daily life, the burden of which Jin experiences, lies the latent links and connections of myth.

Chinese mythology may be what most vividly links Jin to the wider canvas of Chinese culture and heritage, but it also amplifies his self-knowledge. While *Journey to the West* is a long and labyrinthine story, the version of it that Yang includes focuses largely on parts that greatly parallel Jin's life. Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, expresses indecision and restlessness similar to that of Jin. Rash and uncertain, he acts without always considering the long-term consequences to himself and others. Punished for his presumptuous arrogance, he accompanies Xuanzang as a form of repentance. As Michael Carr writes, the concept of the mind-monkey, meaning the turbulent and unreliable mind, has a long history in Buddhist thought long before Sun Wukong, with a passage written in the year 657 imploring the addressee to "make your mind as pure as still water, control your emotion-monkey's indolence and fidgeting."<sup>22</sup> Sun Wukong exemplified and promulgated this conception of the turbulent "mind-monkey." The mythological tapestry ensconces Jin within tales and ideas beyond his own constrained worldview, but this difference does not suggest strangeness, but rather similarity. Yang gives *American Born Chinese* a tripartite structure. One storyline focuses on Jin, another on Danny, and the third on Sun Wukong. These stories appear different initially, but by interweaving them, Yang makes the ultimate point that they are not. The version of Sun Wukong present in *American Born Chinese* struggles to accept the fact that he is a monkey, and his mischievous actions occur as a reaction to this perception of inadequacy, leading to his punishment by Tze-Yo-Tzuh, the creator, who asserts, "I do not make mistakes, little monkey. A monkey I intended you to be. A monkey you are" (81). This struggle emphasizes the link between Sun Wukong and Jin. Both their stories culminate in self-acceptance. Jin returns from self-exile by understanding the inevitable interconnectedness of all things. Even in the "disguise" of Danny, he still retains a permanent, inescapable connection to his heritage. He also retains a connection to Chinese mythology, to a cosmos of narratives beyond himself that he nonetheless experiences as related to his personal story.

## 6 | THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF DISNEYFICATION

The Disney version attempts to emphasize this link between the specific and the universal. Showrunner Kelvin Yu argues, "I think of this as another great American story, in the same way an Italian American or Irish American or Jewish American story can add to the fabric of what is an American story" (*Inverse*).<sup>16</sup> Just as Yang emphasizes in his graphic novel, a specifically Asian American story can still belong to the broader fabric of American storytelling, and Yu underlines this

fact. In the *Inverse* interview, Yang discusses his trepidation about allowing adaptations of his work before emphasizing that he finds the Disney adaptation appropriate and respectful. Certainly, the adaptation cares for Yang's original and shares its appreciation for Chinese culture. In its basic premise, it depicts a similar scenario, with Jin facing significant discrimination. He must confront the conception that he does not belong in America, that he is a foreigner in the country of his birth, despite the distance he also experiences from his Chinese heritage. Still, the adaptation lessens the biting satire of Yang's graphic novel. It removes much of the self-loathing Jin experiences and his experience of alienation from the cultures of both America and China. It excises his destructive desire for cultural exile and oblivion in favor of a more simplistic *bildungsroman* narrative. As such, the adaptation succumbs to Disney's long history of stripping stories of their original context and sentimentalizing them. Alan Bryman, summarizing the extensive critical barbs directed at Disney storytelling, asserts that they accuse Disney of "sweetening fairy tales and thereby ruining their effect and purpose; falsifying what life is like, for example, by eliminating conflict."<sup>23</sup> For instance, Disney concocts a story of tasteful, dreamlike gentleness in *Cinderella* (1950), even though many variations of the original story include gruesome and graphic violence toward the stepsisters. The Brothers Grimm version has doves peck out their eyes to punish them "for their wickedness and malice with blindness for the rest of their lives."<sup>24</sup>

From one perspective, criticizing such transformations is fatuous considering that the stories Disney adapts have already experienced centuries of remaking and transformation. Yet the disembodiment of these stories and the subsuming of them into the uniform Disney ethos nonetheless deserves concern. These stories drape the past in a golden, harmonious glow while also evoking an unchallenging, robustly optimistic idea of the future, what Tison Pugh calls "an asynchronous nostalgia for fairy tales and fantasies set in the past, while inspired by an American view of the future."<sup>25</sup> This does not necessarily equate to a lack of respect for the original source. Contra Zipes, Disney was not a dark wizard who intentionally desired to overshadow the original fairy tales with his adaptations. Yet these adaptations nonetheless instrumentalize fairy tales according to a nostalgic, serene, and sentimental framework, intensifying their wonder and dreamy bliss while downplaying their viscerally uncomfortable undersides. Unmoored from their origins, they exude reassuring hopefulness to the point of naivete, befitting what Bob Thomas called the "imperishable optimism" of Disney himself.<sup>26</sup>

Something similar happens with *American Born Chinese*. One of the more sharply critical reviews of the Disney adaptation, from *Vulture's* Nicholas Quah, asserts that one may find "it mildly traumatizing to

see *Journey to the West* processed through the Disney IP-ification machine," including a long passage of exposition "that visually renders the MacGuffin in a manner unsettlingly reminiscent of the MCU's Infinity Stones."<sup>27</sup> Disney transforms the mythological elements of the original into a familiar fantasy-adventure plot. Superficially, this plot incorporates elements from *Journey to the West*, but it actually contains those elements within a conventional narrative structure, wherein superpowered characters look for random mystical objects, reminiscent of Disney's Marvel films. In targeting a more mainstream audience, the show elides the more willfully abrasive elements of the graphic novel. The Danny plot vanishes, and with it, any spirit of subversive bitterness. Danny emerges as the end result of cultural ostracization that festers to such an extent that Jin contemplates complete exile, the obliterating of his culture and heritage. Yang understands the danger of such exile, which uproots and hollows the self, but he astutely portrays why Jin, already feeling that he does not truly belong anywhere, psychologically desires to abandon his culture. Thus, the moment in which he returns from exile and embraces Chinese mythology and culture feels genuinely triumphant. In the softened Disney adaptation, Jin experiences far less self-loathing, and his embrace of Chinese culture always seems inevitable. Such inevitability recalls Walter Benjamin's conception of crude historical materialism as the Mechanical Turk, wherein "a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside" an automaton ostensibly built to be a master chess-machine "and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings."<sup>28</sup> What appears to be impartial actually results from a deliberate, subjective desire to frame a narrative in a certain way so as to achieve a desired result. Jin in the Disney version accepts his Chinese identity because the entire force of the narrative pushes him in that direction. The character of Freddie Wong reflects an attempt to incorporate the ideas reflected by the Danny storyline, as Kelvin Yu acknowledged. In the world of Disney's *American Born Chinese*, the actor Jamie Yao once played Freddie, an oafish Asian American caricature, in a sitcom called *Beyond Repair*. The negative impact of this caricature lingers in the present, increasing Jin's insecurities, while Jamie wonders about the ambivalent impact of that role on his life. Yu's interview with *Inverse* discusses how he "came to Yang with ideas to reimagine his book's most challenging elements into something not necessarily palatable, but doable on TV," and how the Freddie Wong storyline was one of these ideas, being for Yu an attempt to "get a lot of the teeth" of the Danny storyline.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, the Freddie Wong narrative does not lack pathos. The storyline somewhat contrasts with the main thrust of the show, which feels overblown with Marvel-like excesses. Quah acridly comments that the



Disney-fied *American Born Chinese* feels “suspiciously like its own form of assimilation.”<sup>27</sup> Such an assertion is perhaps extreme, but the show indeed subsumes Chinese mythology into an extravagant yet predictable world, overwhelmed with special effects. John Ruskin, in discussing the process of architectural restoration, argues that the “restored” building will inevitably be only a pale shadow of the original, as “however careful, and however labored” it may be, it remains “an imitation still, a cold model of such parts as can be modeled.”<sup>29</sup> Such a statement is just as true regarding *American Born Chinese*. Copying the form of the original does not equate to summoning its spirit. That Quan plays Wong has gravity, considering that Quan’s most famous role before *Everything Everywhere* was as Short Round, the comedic sidekick to Indiana Jones in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. The problem with this conflict is that it exists outside of Jin, unlike the Danny storyline in Yang’s original. While virally spread memes of *Beyond Repair* negatively impact Jin’s life, it does not lead him to the kind of haunted soul-searching that overwhelms Jin in Yang’s original.

## 7 | UN-ERASING THE SELF

The most central conflicts of the graphic novel are internal, as Jin suffers shame both because of his heritage and because of his attempts to hide that heritage. Eventually, he accepts his connection to Chinese culture and mythology with no illusions, understanding the difficulties he will face because of his heritage but facing them without despair because of the benefits that heritage gives to him: a tapestry of rituals, legends, and beliefs from which to draw cohesion and wisdom. He embraces a mosaic of memories, both personal and cultural, escaping from what Said calls the “crippling sorrow of estrangement.”<sup>1</sup> Willa Cather, that other great American writer of exile, writes in *My Antonia*, “Between that earth and that sky, I felt erased, blotted out.”<sup>30</sup> Gradually, Jin manages to un-erase himself.

Accepting this heritage, particularly as mediated through mythology, has value because it permits access to a larger expanse of wisdom and experiences beyond the isolated self. At the same time, it reveals that personal problems, however unique they seem, are similar to those that existed in the past. These mythic stories, containing a vibrant intensity and harmony obscured in the habits of daily life, offer particular nourishment. The Disney version, while well-intentioned, captures neither the desire to obliterate the connection to that mythology nor the fullness that mythology offers, as it shines with lucidity and purposefulness often difficult to find in disenchanting modernity. Its idea of Chinese mythology, filtered through the lens of Marvel, lacks specificity, and it

greatly downplays Jin’s futile, terrified yearning to destroy his link to his heritage. As such, it can seem defanged. Its reassurances remove the desolation of absolute exile that pulsates through Yang’s original, the agonizing fear that, as Said writes, there is “something left behind forever.”<sup>1</sup> The return from exile in Yang’s work has such forcefulness as a statement of personal identity and cultural heritage because it comes after a visceral understanding of how a sense of placelessness, of being in exile everywhere, can cause such a visceral desire to escape that identity.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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