



## Teaching *American Born Chinese* isn't *Beyond Repair*: Preparing Preservice Teachers to Navigate a “Great Wall” of Mirrors and “Bamboo” Windows

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### Abstract

I analyze Gene Luen Yang's 2006 graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (ABC) in order to highlight ways in which this text presents opportunities for teachers of Asian American young adult literature to lean into the complexities of Asian American identities and stereotypes (Yang 2006). By putting American ideologies of Orientalization into conversation with Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), I create an analytical lens that centers the transnational circulations of power that inform the curricular representations of Asian Americans in the US curriculum. Building on this, I insert considerations of teacher education literature into Asian and Asian American Studies in order to trouble dichotomization between “US” and “world,” which leaves little room for K-12 teachers to foreground transnational contexts. I offer a model for navigating the self-work that informs their pedagogical decisions to teach complex texts by identifying the “Great Wall” of mirrors and “bamboo” windows of racial stereotypes and racializing rhetorical positioning within texts that influence their decisions in the classroom, including their selection of which texts to offer their students. I show that this model provides a framework for resisting essentialized narratives of Asian American identities by centering teachers' own critical self-reflections.

## Introduction

When I was a kid, my mother used to tell me Chinese folktales before bedtime. My mother is an immigrant. She was born in mainland China and eventually made her way to the United States for graduate school. ...Monkey King is one of my protagonists, but [*American Born Chinese*] isn't a direct adaptation of my mother's stories. Sun Wukong occupies too high a pedestal in my mind. I wouldn't dream of attempting a project like that. Instead, I invited Monkey King into my story so that I could talk about the uneasiness of growing up Asian in America. ...I tracked down an English translation of *Journey to the West*, the centuries-old Chinese classic that first told the monkey king's story. Reading it was the first time I encountered him on my own, without the filter of my mother. Turns out, my mother was pretty faithful. As I read it, I realized that American superheroes hadn't replaced Sun Wukong in my heart after all. Superman, Spider-Man, and Captain America were simply Western expressions of everything I loved about the monkey king.

— Gene Luen Yang, “Foreword,” *Journey to the West*

Reading Gene Luen Yang's foreword to a translation of Wu Cheng-En's *Journey to the West*, I learned that Yang, author of *American Born Chinese* (ABC) (Yang 2006), and I share some lived experiences. We're both Taiwanese Americans who grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and we both became educators who have kept the bedtime stories our parents told us close to our hearts in ways that inform our work. Unlike Yang, perhaps, the stories my parents and teachers shared with me placed me as an observer to Chinese cultures from my position as a transnational (but not transracial) adoptee. Many of the books that my parents and teachers read to me seemed instructive, teaching me *how* to be Chinese American, or functioned as a “window” into Chinese cultures, rather than a “mirror” that let me see myself in a book (Sims Bishop 1990). They would use the phrase “Chinese people” rather than “us,” for example. My childhood also differed from Yang's in that my encounters with the Monkey King (Sun Wukong) were not replaced by Western expressions of him. Rather, my encounters with the Monkey King and *Journey to the West* felt like an adaptation of the stories my parents had read to me. This complicated what Chineseness could be for me as my parents presented Chineseness to me in ways that exposed my liminal social positionality as Taiwanese American (Louie 2018). My in-betweenness (He 2010) between Taiwaneseness and Chineseness, Taiwaneseness and Taiwanese Americanness, and, as a result, “insider” and “outsider” influences how I teach future teachers to engage with texts. And it is with this in-betweenness that I read ABC.

ABC's critical acclaim led to it becoming a rare example of an Asian and Asian American text commonly and frequently found in school libraries (Couzelis 2018). Consequently, teaching ABC means leaning into the messy identity negotiations that counter stereotypes about Asian Americans that the story offers. ABC follows Chinese American protagonist Jin Wang and Taiwanese newcomer Sun Wei-Chen as they navigate American schools and

their own identities. The first arc begins with Sun Wukong's rejection from the Court of Heaven for being a monkey and his imprisonment by Tze-Yo-Tzuh, a Chinese adaptation of the Christian god. The second arc follows Jin Wang's experiences of racism at a predominantly white school, leading him to embrace his racialized proximity to whiteness and distance himself from whiteness as well as from Sun Wei-Chen, a Taiwanese newcomer. *ABC*'s third arc traces stories of cousins Chin-Kee, who embodies racist tropes, and Danny, revealed as Jin's avatar projection of his yearning for whiteness. Yang reveals that Wei-Chen is Sun Wukong's son, and the series concludes with their reconciliation after a falling-out. *ABC* falls within Rodriguez and Kim's framework of a "cultural insider" text since it depicts and was written by Asian Americans, which, in schools, can implicitly legitimize *ABC* to speak for an entire community, despite its complexity of racializing visual and narrative cues (Rodriguez and Kim 2018).

Being a graphic novel, visual and narrative cues lead texts to feel familiar; often, these cues rely on familiar signifiers that capture an "essence" of a particular community, which can lead these cues to uphold stereotypes or *essentialism* by framing them in order to highlight their absurdity (Bow 2019; Rodriguez and Kim 2018). At the same time, others take up essentialism strategically, in order to challenge it (Oh 2017; Song 2010). Consequently, *ABC* can be hard to teach with because it asks teachers to identify and challenge essentialized visual cues that draw on stereotypes. Asian Americans' narrow representation in US school curricula (An 2022) necessitates the teaching of *ABC*'s subtle countering of the layered stereotypes and historical misrepresentation resulting from persistent Western ideological construction of Asian and Asian diasporic contexts examined in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1978). In order to address this need, building on Sims Bishop's seminal framework of windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors (Sims Bishop 1990: ix), in this article, I propose the "Great Wall" and "bamboo" windows approach (see below).

My analytical lens merges Asian Studies with Asian American Studies literature, while noting area studies' (e.g. Asian Studies) and ethnic studies' (e.g. Asian American Studies) discrete epistemological origins. I concur with Kuan-hsing Chen's argument that, when analyzing global circulations of power and identity in the context of Asian Americans, "Asian Studies in the United States... is and must be American Studies" (Chen 2010: 253). My analysis of *ABC* is also grounded in Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), an extension of Critical Race Theory and Asian American Critical Legal Studies, that centers Asian Americans' racialized experiences as transnational ones (Chang, 1993; Iftikar & Museus, 2018). I extend AsianCrit's applications in education (e.g. Breslin, Dahlen, Kwisnek, and Leathersich 2024; Chong 2023; Kim and Hsieh 2023), analyzing the racialized ideologies embedded within graphic novels' visual and artistic elements in a similar manner to analyses of other young adult literature (Nishime 2022; Rodriguez and Kim 2018; Short, 2009; Domke, Weippert, and Apol 2018; Weippert, Domke, and Apol 2018). I argue that teachers can deepen their students' engagements with *ABC* and other Asian American texts by scaffolding the multiple layers of essentialism within the text in

order to engage intersections of identities and resistances to reading only harm in ABC's narrative and visual cues, while encouraging students to engage in their own critical self-reflection.

### **AsianCrit as an Analytical Lens for Educational Justice**

In AsianCrit terms, Orientalism creates the epistemological conditions in which Asia as an “ideological fiction” (Said 1979: 328) shapes the racialization of Asian Americans, or “Asianization,” a process which historically benefits elites both in Asia and in the West (Chen 2010). Imperialist discourses that positioned Asian diasporic racialization and made Orientalism synonymous with domination within diasporic contexts by highlighting the exoticism and alienness of migrants from Asia (and especially early Chinese newcomers) in turn created essentialized Chinese characteristics that underpin the baseline of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian American biases in America on the one hand and create “panethnic lumping” of foreignness of Asian Americans on the other (Espiritu, 1992; Nodelman 1992; Tuan 1998; Chong 2023; Duara 1995). In this process, white supremacy sought “to consolidate the coherence” of Asian diaspora, creating a singular label whereby people of multiple ethnic communities were racialized as Asian American, creating sociopolitical conditions for the possibility of “intraethnic conflict” (Lowe 1996: 67; Couzelis 2018: 50). Such consolidation provided the pretexts for 19th-century anti-Chinese xenophobia and racism (Chao and Chan 2019). Yet, as Kuan-hsing Chen wrote, “China in relation to East Asia is never the only reference point for seeing the world” (Chen 2010: 253), especially given the impacts of Japanese imperialism and colonization in the 19th and 20th centuries. As a result, labels like “Asian American” impose coherence onto an otherwise disparate group of ethnic communities by “defining and delimiting the other” (Leonardo 2020: 20). After WWII, following the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act and its 1965 amendment, the “Asian American” label was subsequently expanded to include more people and communities. As a result, racialized stereotypes such as the “model minority” and the “yellow peril” came to impact those communities, together spinning a racial narrative that Asian Americans’ so-called predispositions towards obedience and hard-work made them assimilable despite their alienness (Lowe, 1996; Takaki 1998; Wang 1995). These tropes also led to visual narratives and discourses that animalized and embedded these stereotypes, creating racial caricatures that necessitate AsianCrit analyses of the “transnational contexts” (Bow 2021; Iftikar & Museus 2018; Jung 2022).

In response to the complexities of navigating the impacts of racialization on Asian American lived experiences, I turn to AsianCrit. AsianCrit draws “upon how realities of how the [model minority myth and perpetual foreigner tropes] are used against Asian Americans” (Kim and Hsieh 2022: 8) and the multiple identities that might be sources of discrimination (with)in Asian American communities. AsianCrit’s seven tenets are: (1) Asianization; (2) transnational contexts; (3) (re)constructive history; (4) strategic (anti)essentialism; (5) intersectionality; (6) story, theory, and praxis; and (7) commitment to social justice (Iftikar and Museus, 2018). AsianCrit provides a lens to disrupt

essentialized discourses about Asian American differential racialization and the impacts of diverse histories of imperialism and colonialism that Asians experienced on sustaining the panethnic Asian American coalition. In education, AsianCrit calls attention to essentialized representations of Asian Americans in curricula (An 2017; Rodríguez, An, and Kim 2024) and children's literature (Breslin, Dahlen, Kwisnek, and Leathersich 2024; Yi 2020) as well as the analytical glorification of US imperialism in children's literature (An 2021, 2023; Coloma 2006). The stereotypes that saturate American curricula and media about Asia and Asian American diaspora seep through our lives via overt and covert symbolism, and a robust yet nuanced approach is thus required in order to identify and tackle the overlapping layers of essentialism imposed on Asian Americans in education (Ang 2020; Duara 2010). Creation of stereotypes is ongoing, grounded in an asymmetry of power that persists. This necessitates analyses of texts that focus on Asian Americans' agency to intervene in racialization processes, challenge Orientalized stereotypes, and reveal the asymmetry of power behind the stereotypes (Chong 2023; Bow 2021; Jung 2022). Centering transnational contexts also works to disentangle the West's "representational detachment" (Lee 2020: 10). It is with these points in mind that I engage below in a critical reading of *ABC*.

### **Using Visual Rhetorics of Asian American Texts**

In the classroom, teachers can sometimes inadvertently betray their good intentions and normalize Orientalized voyeurism by only focusing on a text's and image's Asianness and Asian Americanness. Sometimes, this is due to curricular organizational frameworks that maintain a global=Other=different paradigm that both dichotomizes and essentializes Asian and Asian American texts into a single body of work. Doing so erases the continuities and disparities between resistances to Orientalism communicated by the nuanced, but connected, experiences between those who share in identifying with the Asian American label (Bradford 2007; Goodwin 2010). In American educational spaces, Othering of the "global" (Short 2009, 2019) necessitates critical global literacies "as a tool to address the intentional erasure of shared (and differing) oppressions and histories" (Hsieh 2023: 220). It is also important to be sensitive about "damage-centered" (Tuck 2009) portrayals of racialized people in literature which only serve to emphasize the extent of imperial and colonial violence, heightening the risk that a text can amplify readers' feelings of Otherness, in turn impacting students' racialization processes, that is to say, who curricular and other educational structures allow them to see themselves as.

Against this backdrop, disrupting stereotypes in a text's narrative or an image's visual cues of Asianness contributes to enriching classroom use of Asian American young adult literature, including graphic novels (Breslin, Dahlen, Kwisnek, and Leathersich 2024; Nishime 2022). Often, stereotypical narrative and visual cues uphold the lumping of perceptions about diverse communities such as Asian Americans into whole, "familiar" tropes (Schieble 2011). *ABC* challenges such lumping and familiarizing tropes partly because it is a graphic novel that relies on a sophisticated interplay between narrative and

visuals (Davis 2015; Schieble 2014). Simultaneously, others argue that visually and narratively mobilizing these stereotypes can foreground their absurdity, revealing the historical erasures that sustain them (Hattori 2018). Dealing with visual and rhetorical cues in the classroom is a complex pedagogical opportunity, but it is essential in the classroom, since when teachers forgo this opportunity, they risk positioning critical texts as allegory, thereby preserving the emotional distance that abstracts the underlying systems of power that rely on these stereotypes remaining unquestioned (Goodwin 2010). In other words, in classrooms, visual and narrative cues can inadvertently reproduce the “purposeful invisibility of global and critical literacies” (Hsieh 2023: 216) about Asian American communities which can obstruct Asian American students from telling their own stories. These barriers also uphold the select few Asian and Asian American texts accessible in schools as representative of “the,” as opposed to “an” Asian American experience which in turn narrows who students can see themselves as, and exemplifies the material impacts of a narrow curricular “representation” of Asian Americans.

Stereotypical visual cues can also create permission structures for students to recite these tropes packaged as “cute” that belie grotesque racial caricatures (See Bow 2019, 2021; Hintz and Tribunella 2019; Mudambi 2019). Permission structures can include “permission” to laugh at a caricature without interrogating why as well as insensitive selection/recommendations of texts to students in which *racial* satire becomes *racist* satire because these representations can be simply funny. By contrast, Kim (2021) argues that scaffolding, or cuing, of racial satire in Asian American texts can facilitate “rejection, subversion, and perhaps even reclamation of the stereotypes that have historically been used to disparage them” (Kim 2021: 314). Contextualizing choices of visuals and the positionalities of authors themselves also helps to enhance students’ contextual analytical skills by allowing them to humanize authors while remaining critical readers of a text’s content as well as identify layers of essentialism that might coexist within a single text. As a result, this context can also scaffold, or prepare, students for identifying racist rhetorical positioning within a text and “critique and resist their positioning, re-author their own stories, and take transformative social action” (Hsieh 2023: 222). Needless to say, using graphic novels in classrooms comes with the added challenge of addressing essentialism in the visual narrative of the book itself because of comics’ historical role in perpetuating negative racial stereotypes of Asian Americans as forever foreigners in the US (Song 2010: 80). But Yang’s *ABC* tries to resist stereotypes through the use of the scripted laugh track, which “interpolates the audience to clap or laugh at what is clearly racist and wrong ... [enabling] readers to affectively experience shame...and rethink and reflect upon the silent racism that still pervades” (Oh 2017: 24) that led them to laugh in the first place. Yet, there is a danger here, for the use of graphic novels’ visual cues might simply invite students to merely *identify* stereotypes (Gomes and Carter 2010). Schieble suggests that *ABC*, when included as a “text” to include graphic novels and images, they can become a pedagogical tool for enhancing students’ critical visual literacy that would enable students to penetrate the surface and reach the “structural understanding of racism” (Schieble 2014: 49; see also

Scheible 2011; Hammond 2012). By contrast, B. Sams and M. Crippen caution teachers about the ample room for misinterpretation of *ABC* as a “nontraditional text,” recommending that can introduce white students to the skill of nuancing their own identities and critically interrogating their gazes on communities othered by dominant narratives (Sams and Crippen 2018: 34). While these approaches can elicit deeper student thinking, they leave the racializing visual cues within the text itself unquestioned in favor of more generic pedagogical goals. I present below my own reading of *ABC*, examining how the characters grapple with racism and xenophobia and navigating the layered essentialism found across *ABC*’s narrative and visual cues.

### Reading Critically with a Lens of Intersectional Racialized Awareness

From the beginning of *ABC*, Yang cues readers into the “schema” needed to understand Jin Wang’s and Sun Wei-Chen’s experience of in-betweenness (He 2010).<sup>1</sup> This process becomes clear with how readers are introduced to Jin. As Jin moves from San Francisco to Mayflower Elementary School, he leaves a bubble in which he may have been insulated from anti-Asian American racism (Chong 2021). In a sequence of eight panels, Jin’s new third-grade teacher, Mrs. Greeder, introduces him to the class as the students look on. She begins, “Class, I’d like us all to give a warm Mayflower Elementary welcome to your new friend and classmate **Jing Jang** [sic]” (Yang 2006: 30). Jin immediately corrects her— “*Jin Wang*”—prompting Mrs. Greeder to repeat the proper pronunciation in a connected speech bubble. She then adds, “*He and his family recently moved to our neighborhood all the way from **China!***” (Yang 2006: 30), to which Jin again corrects her, “**San Francisco.**” Mrs. Greeder adjusts herself once more, while Jin’s facial expression grows increasingly despondent. The moment escalates when a white classmate interjects with the accusation that Chinese people “eat dogs” (Yang 2006: 31). Mrs. Greeder brushes off the remark with only a mild rebuke— “*Now be **nice**, Timmy!*” (Yang 2006: 30).

Carrie Hintz and Eric Tribunella argue that moments like this one juxtapose the “movement from child to young adult— the experience of adolescence— with the movement from China to the United States— the experience of immigration” (Hintz and Tribunella 2019: 212). This vignette makes Jin’s immigration story hyper-visible, with Jin positioned as “foreign” and Orientalized despite being an American intermediary for Wei-Chen throughout the text. This moment exemplifies the danger of forgoing the racialized rhetorical positioning of Asian Americans because it would be so easy to simply laugh at Jin’s misnaming.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this analysis of American Born Chinese, visual elements are conveyed through textual description and dialogue is quoted directly (including original emphasis such as bolded text), as the journal’s open-access format precludes reprinting the original panels.

Focusing on Jin and his reaction to Mrs. Greeder's introduction highlights the subtle violence of misnaming that dehumanizes students by suggesting that their names are unworthy of pronouncing as the students wish (Chong 2024). Focusing on Jin also underscores for teachers the ways in which microaggressions can cause and sustain harm to students. It is important to cue in scripted laughter, since otherwise readers may be left to read *racist* satire into this scene rather than observe Yang mobilizing the absurdity of some teachers' choice to avoid ever learning how to pronounce their students' names. Scenes like this build context for students, helping them to understand that Mrs. Greeder misnaming Jin is neither banal nor innocuous, but an example of othering which only serves to augment the effect of forever foreigner tropes against Asian Americans (An 2020).

Later in *ABC*, another instance that helps build a lens of racialized awareness occurs again over eleven panels in which classmate Melanie rejects Danny (Jin's white avatar) after he asks her on a date. The scene begins with Danny awkwardly approaching Melanie in the hallways of Oliphant School as Danny attempts to apologize for Chin-Kee's crude fawning over Melanie the previous night when she went over to Danny's house to study. In this scene, some panels are bordered with yellow scripted laughter when Melanie references Chin-Kee. Danny then proceeds to ask Melanie to go to a movie together, but Melanie responds that she would rather remain friends and, off-panel, says "I don't want to do anything to mess that [their friendship] up" (Yang 2006: 123). Danny, in a panel composed from Melanie's point of view, looking straight at her, replies "**I'm not like him, Melanie**" (Yang 2006: 123). Melanie, facing Danny, responds "What? This doesn't have anything to do with him!" (Yang 2006: 123), to which Danny gesticulates and says "**I'm *nothing* like him! I don't even know how we're *related*!**" (Yang 2006: 123). In the following panel Melanie says "**Calm down, Danny! Geez! This isn't about that, okay? It's about us being friends, and me not wanting to jeopardize that!**" (Yang 2006: 123). Danny then glumly retorts "whatever," in a panel with solid black-background.

Yang characterizes Danny as coveting proximity to whiteness. Danny still internalizes his Otherness as he distances himself from Chin-Kee and blames his association with Chin-Kee for Melanie's rejection. Danny reenacts "heterosexist and patriarchal American masculinity towards the opposite sex of the dominant racial group" (Yoo 2022: 166), flaunting his proximity to white masculinity and, as a result, his humanity (Eng, 2001; Wanzo 2020). This dynamic offers teachers the opportunity to zoom in on the pedagogical importance of everyday embodiments of intersections between Asian American identity and masculinity; Jin's (Danny's) character exemplifies the feeling of racial castration in which Asian American men are "feminized and emasculated" (Oh 2017: 21; Eng 2001; also Couzelis 2018), highlighting the intersections of race and gender that ground power structures which marginalize students of color in schools. This feminization aligns with how whiteness simultaneously essentializes and Orientalizes Asian American men in ways that affirm the supremacy of white masculinity, equating it with humanity (Couzelis 2018).

This interaction cautions and encourages teachers to consider how Asian American Orientalization manifests differently for Asian Americans of different gender identities and how they are respectively perceived in the context of white supremacy (Couzelis 2018). Visually, Yang draws Danny with sharp lines that reinforce white masculinity and has Danny mimicking white masculine-coded behaviors; by way of contrast, Yang draws Jin more softly. This visual cue complements narrative cues that signal Danny's disassociation with Asianness as well as his lack of control over narratives about the identities he outwardly presents. The assimilationist logic rewards the distance that Danny (Jin) claims from Orientalized stereotypes about his Chinese American male identity that gender him as impotent (Eng 2001; Kuo 2010).

### Resisting Racist Rhetorical Positioning

Racist visual and narrative cues about Asian American communities as *allegory* can also result in stereotypes in the text remaining unquestioned by students, especially when those stereotypes are grounded in specific parts (e.g. "China") of the Asian American coalition. Foregrounding moments of resistance to these portrayals offers opportunities for students to disengage from racist narrative positioning while also navigating the complexities of scripted laughter (Oh 2017).

When a teacher assigns Wei-Chen and Amelia as caretakers for classroom animals, Wei-Chen's dialogue shows how he resists being lumped in with other classmates like Jin and Suzy. After Wei-Chen and Amelia have been locked inside a closet by accident, Wei-Chen explains the relationship between himself and Jin to Amelia in three connected panels. Amelia comments that "You're [Wei-Chen] pretty good friends with him, aren't you?" (Yang 2006: 101). The following panel zooms into Wei-Chen on a solid black background. In three interconnected dialogue bubbles, Wei-Chen replies to Amelia, "When I move here to America I was afraid nobody wants to be my friend. I come from a difference place. Much, much different" (Yang 2006: 102). Wei-Chen continues "But my first day in school here I meet Jin. From then I know everything's okay. He treat me like a littler bother, show me how things work in America. He help me with my English. He teach me hip English phrase like 'don't have a cow, man' and 'word of your,' no, no... '**word to your mother.**' Ha ha. He take me to McDonald's and buy me French fries. I think sometimes my accent embarrass him, but Jin still willing to be my friend. In actuality, for a long, long time my only friend is him" (Yang 2006: 102). The next panel then frames Amelia looking back convivially to Wei-Chen, listening as he continues "Yes, I owe Jin very much. He has a good **soul**. If he was not here, I don't know. I would have been so **lonely**" (Yang 2006: 123).

In the above, Wei-Chen positions his Taiwanese identity as different, but never as a deficit, as he struggles at times to speak to Jin and others in English; calling attention to his "accent," Wei-Chen never expresses shame over it or his Taiwanese identity even if he perceives that he is causing Jin embarrassment, thereby undercutting Jin's role as an American intermediary. Unlike Yang's resistances to stereotypes through characters like

Chin-Kee, Wei-Chen's character exposes a layer of nuance that invites readers to challenge their assumptions about Chineseness as a monolithic bellwether for Asianness in American sociocultural imaginations. For example, Jin, not a white student, introducing Wei-Chen to McDonald's reinforces the former's role as an intermediary who can help the latter assimilate into white middle class norms. Wei-Chen also shares with Amelia that, while he may not share every identity in common with Jin, he notes his social positionality in ways that maintain his affinity (see Iftikar and Museus 2018). In doing so, Wei-Chen's agency to choose to befriend Jin distinguishes between intentional coalition and the "inevitability" of panethnic affinity or solidarity (Hsieh 2023). Yang's use of subtle intra-racial negotiation between Asian American students (in this case, between Jin and Wei-Chen) challenges the stereotypes imposed upon Asian American communities while also challenging the anti-Asian racism internalized by some Asian Americans, thereby eliciting resistance to reading *ABC* simply as an allegory for all Asian American experiences (Bow 2021; Ma 2021). Yang's depiction of Jin and Wei-Chen's friendship makes visible their coalitional negotiation in its messiness, ambiguity, even tension, and the solidarity they eventually demonstrate is not inherent or given. As a result, Yang rhetorically repositions Jin and Wei-Chen to suggest how essentialism and anti-essentialism can be *strategic* and *substantial*. Showing how Jin and Wei-Chen's relationship involves a negotiation over their shared identities and their differences, Yang invites readers to notice both characters' agency in relation to becoming closer. In the classroom, while Jin and Wei-Chen share a racialized identity within the US context, Yang's foregrounding of their identity negotiation can help students deepen their understanding of the shared and unique experiences Asians and Asian Americans bring to their daily interactions in schools.

### Agency and Coalitional Negotiation

Reading *ABC* through a lens of racialized awareness calls attention to Jin's and Wei-Chen's shared racialization and how they both "figure out" how to be Asian and Asian American in their school— emphasizing each of their experiences as *an* (not "the") Asian American experience in schools. At the same time, their story also shows how Asian American proximity to whiteness makes it easy to embody model minority tropes that rely on self-Orientalization. I highlight two moments in *ABC* that model this tension about the pursuit of and exclusion from whiteness in which Jin rejects his own racialized and gendered existence. I then focus on how Jin and Wei-Chen each embody agency and grapple with their different kinds of masculinity and nationalities in the context of their shared identities while also underscoring the need for intersectional analyses to foreground the diversity of Asian American experiences.

In the first moment, Jin forcibly kisses Suzy Nakamura, who is dating Wei-Chen. Wei-Chen then goes to Jin's house and confronts him about assaulting Suzy. During their exchange, Jin becomes progressively angrier. In four panels set in Jin's front doorway, Jin, still bruised from Suzy defending herself from his advance, points at Wei-Chen and says "You and I are **not** alike. We're **nothing** alike" (Yang 2006: 191). The next panel reverses the composition,

with Jin's back to the reader and Wei-Chen facing Jin with an incredulous expression. Jin continues, "and don't worry about your stupid girlfriend, she's not my type" (Yang 2006: 191), to which Wei-Chen replies "then **why**—?" (Yang 2006: 191). The third panel zooms into Jin's angry facial expression, and in three connected speech bubbles, Jin states, "Maybe I just don't think you're **right** for her, all right? Maybe I don't think you're **worthy** of her. Maybe I think she can do **better** than an **F.O.B.** [fresh off the boat] like **you**" (Yang 2006: 191) after which Wei-Chen can be seen punching Jin on the cheek opposite that which Suzy hit previously.

Jin suggests that his Chinese Americanness is different from Wei-Chen's Taiwanese-ness, even using a slur that others Wei-Chen and marginalizes their shared identity markers. Mimicking the behavior of Greg (a white classmate) when Greg says Jin should not be dating Amelia, Jin objectifies Suzy in order "to confirm his own masculine power and pleasure," making her "a channel through which to vent male anger and frustration at white racism and a means through which to establish hegemonic, heterosexual masculine identity" (Oh 2017: 170). Jin's violent behavior illustrates his simultaneous gendered power (*vis-à-vis* Asian American females) and racialized marginality (*vis-à-vis* whites) in the context of deficits in his ethnicity that (he feels) others perceive. But Jin weaponizes his proximity to white masculinity to (physically) compete with Wei-Chen for Suzy (Couzelis 2018). For teachers in the classroom, the conflict between Jin and Wei-Chen can serve as a good reminder for students to look out for assimilationist logics that "reward" students of color for becoming more like whites, a scenario in which an Other is maintained, especially within the Black-white binary (Hsieh 2023). Jin draws on his racialization as Asian American and his racialized proximity to whiteness *vis-à-vis* the model minority myth to effectively assert that he is "more American" than Wei-Chen, rather than an intermediary, by using a slur that places him in an oppositional, Orientalized dynamic to Wei-Chen. For teachers, this interaction also disrupts narratives of universal sameness (essentialism), as seen in the example of Mrs. Greeder's pushing Jin and Wei-Chen together because of an imagined "inevitability," asserting that they would be friends because they were both "Asian." The power dynamic that Jin asserts over Wei-Chen, based on Wei-Chen's longer residence in the United States, highlights how transnational contexts make visible the fact that no text can represent *all* Asian American experiences while a single text can foreground how many different Asian American experiences there are to represent. *ABC* brings student readers closer to those nuances and invites them to witness how Jin and Wei-Chen can both be Asian and Asian American while also observing that their racialization shifts in time and space - for example, Wei-Chen, too, will be assimilated and will be closer to whites in time compared to newcomers from Asia (See Song 2013, 2018; Wang 2017).

In another scene, Danny (Jin), proceeds to attack Chin-Kee after Chin-Kee performs "She Bang" in the school library. In the first four of a series of nine panels dotted with scripted laughter, Danny drags Chin-Kee out of the library and then outside of the school building

by Chin-Kee's long hair (styled in a stereotypical "queue") while singing and waxing at Danny. Danny then grabs Chin-Kee by his clothing (what appears to be a "*magua*," 馬褂) and slams him into an adjacent bicycle rack. Danny then exclaims to Chin-Kee **"I'm sick of you ruining my life, Chin-Kee! I want you to pack up and go back to where you came from!"** (Yang 2006: 205). In the subsequent altercation, Chin-Kee and Danny fight with Danny repeatedly and exasperatedly telling Chin-Kee to **"go away!"** (Yang 2006: 205). Throughout the altercation, Danny can be seen shaking with rage with Chin-Kee retaining his generally jovial, but stereotypical, facial expression with two prominent front teeth sticking out of his mouth.

Danny, overwhelmed by ambiguity and ambivalence about his own identity, defaults to the hypermasculine behavior of violence and rage, mobilizing racialized and Orientalized logics to humiliate Chin-Kee for his "foreignness." Here, Danny seems to project his self-hate based on gendered and racial inferiority. This scene is scaffolded and complicated for students because it exemplifies that Danny's (Jin's) proximity to whiteness initially protects him within US racial hierarchies, witnessed in his telling Chin-Kee to "go back to where [he comes] from." Yet, the forever foreigner label extends to Danny as an Asian American despite his performance of his proximity to whiteness. *ABC* offers models for students on how to notice the "everydayness" of anti-Asian American stereotypes that can haunt Asian American students' perceptions of themselves and others. Importantly, such stereotypes are not pre-given but made and reinforced in everyday practices in (c)overt ways by students who may not be comfortable disrupting their own socialization. It is here that teachers, alongside students, must include themselves in discussion and engage in critical self-reflection, considering their own biases and prejudices. Having students engage in such a process can, in turn, nuance the ways in which students situate themselves within complex texts.

It should also be noted that Jin's (Danny's) navigation of his own socialization into white American masculinity as well as his relationship to Wei-Chen challenges the perceived passivity of Asian American people under the model minority myth. Toward the conclusion, readers see Jin's (Danny's) behavior become increasingly aggressive and toxic-masculine, seemingly driven by his desire to covet his racialized proximity to certain white masculinity. For teachers, the showdown between Danny and Chin-Kee can provide a point of connection to and comparison with previous scenes in which characters navigate multiple layers of stereotypes and negotiate how they come to their shared panethnic Asian American identities—or not. Given that, in the end, Jin and Wei-Chen talk late into the night, apparently for the first time, frankly and in-depth, the reader is assured that friendship—if not panethnic solidarity—between different (Asian American) people is possible.

## A “Great Wall” of Mirrors and “Bamboo” Windows

For many teachers, Sims Bishop’s notion of windows and mirrors is helpful in dealing with texts such as *ABC* (Sims Bishop 1990). Sims Bishop proposes that a framework of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors be used when conducting research into the selection and teaching of texts. This framework seeks to use literature to transform “human experience and [reflect] it back to us,” suggesting that in such a reflection, “we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience” (Sims Bishop 1990: ix). When a text is a window, it can help readers see other ways of being and knowing. When it is a mirror, it can offer ways for readers to see themselves in literature (See McNair and Edwards 2021; Enriquez 2021). Yet, sorting literature into that which is diverse and that which is not, or according to geography, presents additional challenges. Children from marginalized communities do not live in different “worlds,” where one is “diverse,” and one is not. For teachers, critically curating texts for students means engaging in self-work when selecting texts and not imposing other technologies of Othering, or Orientalization onto students. Nuancing how teachers present Asian American identities means disrupting perceptions that Asian American students, like all students of color, can only be one predisposed “thing.”

I propose that teachers engage in the practice of what I call climbing the “Great Wall” of mirrors and bending “bamboo” windows. By “Great Wall,” I refer to the ways in which the teaching of Asian American texts without disrupting these stereotypes fortifies them and selectively uplifts certain narratives to speak for all Asian Americans. Hence, climbing it (i.e., overcoming it) is important. Similarly, “bamboo” windows, rather than bamboo ceilings (Hyun 2005), intend to strategically disrupt Orientalist stereotypes that persist even in the critical teaching of Asian American texts. Bamboo, a common stereotypical symbol of Asia, is a highly flexible yet sturdy material and so would provide us with an appropriate analogy when we are trying to “bend” stereotypes and interrogate their intergenerational impacts (Chong 2024; Louie 2018; An 2020).

To climb and navigate the “Great Wall” of mirrors begins with thinking about how texts such as *ABC* first introduce aspects of Asian American histories centered on certain whiteness by building racialized schemas with students—in the case of *ABC*, it is the school-age, young adult context, which offers added scaffolding for K-12 students. Here, teachers’ self-work can help them to locate themselves and their readings before they begin facilitating their students’ analysis. For instance, when teaching *ABC*, I reflected on my Taiwanese American identity while preparing preservice teachers and instructors. My scaffolds disrupted monolithic assumptions about Asian Americans, such as conflation with Chinese and Chinese Americans. This showed students that people have multiple pathways to their racialized identities, complicating how they arrive at their ethnic identities. My students noticed that there are multiple ways to “be Chinese,” just as there are many ways to “be Asian American.” This critical reflection is important when teachers consider the ways in which they interpret and counter dominant historical narratives. This

ongoing practice does not necessarily guarantee that any teacher will emerge being objectively anti-racist, but it is my hope that they will become critically aware of the ways in which they give and take away agency from marginalized communities throughout the curriculum they teach.

In *ABC*, different pathways frame Jin's and Wei-Chen's jostling over their Asian American identities as an identity negotiation over who defines Asianness. Here, the notion of "bamboo" windows becomes handy. *ABC* provides scaffolds to focus readers on how marginalized communities engage in "figuring out" how a breadth of characters can be windows and/or mirrors to different facets of lived experiences in Asianized bodies. Foregrounding these multiple pathways reveals the subtle but violent ways in which certain ethnic communities' representation becomes synonymous with an entire racial group, such as in the case of Chineseness. I scaffolded *ABC* by turning my reflections on my Taiwanese American identity into class discussion topics to guide students through the layers of essentialism that Yang provides readers in the book, allowing students to notice and differentiate between covert and overt racism. For example, we questioned why Jin and Wei-Chen were inevitably drawn to each other even though they had reached the US in very different circumstances, were from different origins, and had taken different journeys. These discussions started with acknowledging that some of the visual cues in *ABC* may have felt familiar to some students. This familiarity allowed me to prompt my students to also critically question who gets to say a text is "authentic" as well as reflect on the categorization of texts that labels like authenticity create. In particular, my Asian American students found a space to open up about their own experiences of "figuring out" Asian American identity and then analyze how *ABC* uses stereotypes which centered AsianCrit's strategic (anti)essentialism tenet by foregrounding students' stories against the backdrop of Asian American stereotypes into which they were socialized. Their stories were, just like bamboo, flexible yet sturdy, sometimes requiring "bending" but not broken, other times standing straight. Co-constructing this lens of racialized awareness with students led to more critical questions, including: (1) what social identities do I notice myself prioritizing, and why?; (2) what social identities do I choose to make visible to others?; (3) which social identities do I struggle to embrace and why?; (4) what identities (theirs or others) do I want students to embrace or grapple with as they read this text?; and (5) what tensions, histories, or identities did I notice myself needing to learn more about as I read this text? By incorporating these questions into their own teaching, K-12 teachers can support students in navigating the "Great Wall" of mirrors by reflecting a broader collection of experiences back to them (Reichmuth & Chong 2022).

Yang's invitation into Asian American identity negotiations encourages students to share their own experiences and pathways to Asian American identity. Teachers can emphasize that students have the capacity to intervene in curricular misrepresentation that contributes to Orientalism via the essentialization of racial discourses about Asian Americans (Iftikar and Museus 2018). Teachers can critically reflect on text selection and

scaffolding of Asian American stories, situating them in their histories rather than relying solely on their representations. Challenging the “Great Wall” of mirrors and using “bamboo” windows builds a lens of racialized awareness in students, enabling them to witness identity negotiations and critique racist rhetorical positioning. These skills contribute to students’ agency in resisting anti-Asian American stereotypes by making visible when characters (not only in the graphic novel, but by extension in reality, around them) act strategically, like bamboo plants. Such skills also enable students to discern many ways of being and becoming Asian and Asian American, helping them to move beyond reliance on logics of demographic convenience or abstracting stereotypes and dislocating them from their geographic or historical origins.

### **Conclusion— *Beyond Repair?***

In Disney+’s 2023 adaptation of *ABC*, Jamie Yao (Ke Huy Quan) plays a character named Freddy Wong, a maintenance employee in the fictional show *Beyond Repair*, who becomes famous for his character’s catchphrase, “what can go Wong?” In *Beyond Repair* and Jamie Yao, Chin Kee is reimagined. Yang hesitated to bring *ABC* to the screen, given the challenges of mobilizing racial satire in order to challenge it, and this adaptation exemplifies how Orientalism endures even as Asian American creators exert more agency to disrupt it (Fisher 2023). *ABC*’s TV adaptation, a live-action production, had the added difficulty of reconfiguring how narrative and visual cues informed the racialized rhetorical positioning of Asian American characters, as texts transformed between media raise new and different ways of challenging racialized stereotypes (Hintz and Tribunella 2019). Yang’s reimagining of Chin-Kee in *Beyond Repair* clarifies his thinking about *ABC*’s rejection of the monolithic Orientalization of Asian Americans. Through Quan’s characters in the streaming adaptation of *ABC*, Yang shows that these harmful narratives perpetuate racist fears of Asianness and require new cultural politics and pedagogical practices for teaching about transnational Asian and Asian American identities. Given that many state curricular standards do not disrupt limited Asian American representation via Chinese and East Asian-centeredness, I urge teachers to embrace *ABC*’s decision to use the double-meaning of *Beyond Repair* in the streaming adaptation of the book to signal the laying to rest of both Chin-Kee’s character and this presumed Asian American monolith.

As state curricular frameworks keep sorting texts (and curricula) in terms of binaries such as American and “global,” I urge teachers to keep (critically) teaching *ABC* as representative of *an* Asian American experience. While no text is a panacea for generations-old Orientalism that racializes Asian Americans, teachers are well-positioned to start building skills with students that help make visible multiple pathways and experiences of Asianness through literature. Through navigating monolithic racialization and highly adaptable racialized stereotypes, my hope is that students will feel less like they have to explain away their lived experiences and better equipped to leverage such experiences against those stereotypes when engaging in community interactions with other Asian Americans as well as in interactions beyond those communities. Teachers, despite all that we ask of them, are

uniquely positioned to validate students' counter-stories as well as their resistances to ideologies that sculpt who they are allowed to be. As I reread Yang's reflection in the opening epigraph, I wonder to what extent he sees Chineseness more readily equated with Asianness because of Western Orientalization. Yang's invitation into the pathways to Asian identities also reminds teachers of the many assets their students bring to school each day. I also remain critical of how Chineseness is taken for a lens through which teachers make sense of Asian American texts, which limits the breadth of possibilities for representing Asianness. My charge to teachers, then, is to disrupt stereotypes— they are *Beyond Repair*.

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