

POPULAR CULTURE IN ASIAN AMERICAN COMICS



CLAIMING AMERICA PANEL BY PANEL: POPULAR CULTURE IN  
ASIAN AMERICAN COMICS

By

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines recently published Asian American comics and argues that their engagement with both Asian and American popular culture is a new form of “claiming America.” Popular culture is an arena integral to the American national imagination, and hence these comics assert that Asian Americans are consumers of and participants in American popular media, offer criticisms of stereotypes against Asian Americans and suggest alternative representations and representative practices. I argue that “claiming America” must also be inflected globally due to the emphasis on transnationalism in Asian American cultural production, and Asian American comics actively drawing upon Asian popular culture influences and show that Asian popular culture is increasingly circulated in America. Comics are a unique medium with which to claim a space in American popular culture, as Asian American comics creators creatively employ visualization strategies related to race, and take advantage of the hybridity of word and image comics medium to explore Asian American concerns with hybridity. In this process, Asian American comics also engage with the comic as a popular medium and rework conventions particular to American comics to address Asian American concerns. Ethnicity and popular culture has been a relatively neglected field, and I will argue that ethnic communities can be seen as subcultures in the US, whose relationship to the mainstream involve processes such as cycles of incorporation and reinvention. In addition, comics studies is an emerging academic field, and will benefit from contributions from ethnic minority literary perspectives.

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### Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, the field of Asian American literary studies and literary production concerned itself greatly with the idea of “claiming America.” Coined first by Maxine Hong Kingston, this term describes earlier ground-breaking work on the part of Asian Americans to counter Orientalist stereotypes in the US and to foreground their place in and contributions to American society. In the 1990s, after debates within Asian American studies, the focus moved away from claiming America to focus more on diaspora and transnationalism due to a number of factors, such as the Immigrant and Nationality Act of 1965. This Act admitted new waves of immigrants from Asia who speak their native languages, wish to and are able to maintain ties with Asia through developing communication technology, and thus invest in an Asian identity as much as an American one (Wong 6). Hence, the project of claiming America did not seem to be the most urgent or relevant. However, a shift in academic focus does not mean that Asian American individuals no longer wish to claim America; King-Kok Cheung writes that “Many people of Asian descent feel, to this day, the need to prove their Americanness by shedding their originary culture” (6). In addition, the shift in academic focus may have neglected developments in the significance of claiming America in an age of transnationalism, as well as new strategies Asian Americans employ to assert their place in the United States. Indeed, the theme of “claiming America” is central to recent comics by Asian American creators, especially with regard to participating in American popular culture. This thesis will explore the ways in which Asian American comics both address and embody a type of “claiming America” through interacting with popular culture.

### **Asian American Studies and “Claiming America”**

Different aspects of the Asian American community and different definitions of the term “Asian American” have been emphasized in different stages of scholarship in this field. In its inception, “Asian American” reflected pan-Asian solidarity against the stereotype of the “Oriental” (Li 191-192). In addition, due to exclusionary laws in the US, such as the internment of Japanese American citizens during WWII and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that was not repealed until 1943, additional Asians were unwelcome and their existing presence tightly regulated. This spurred an ethnic nationalist (cultural nationalist) reaction from earlier writers. Asian Americans distinguished themselves from both Americans and Asians, capable of taking on the US as “unambiguous geocultural site of Asian American self-definition” (Li 26). In this ethnic nationalist project, an American subjecthood is favoured over Asian identity, as exemplified from the following statement by Kingston: “We ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese-American,’ because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight... Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American” (qtd. in Cheung 6).

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished immigration quotas, resulted in the diversification of Asian Americans and a large

increase in the number of immigrants from Asia. New systems of capital were also implicated in these social shifts; the US expanded to draw labour from more peripheral regions (Li 199), while Asian nations advanced technologically and some nations, such as China, structured their patterns of production to facilitate foreign trade (Palumbo-Liu 358). Whereas Asian American studies had previously conceived of itself in relation to US-born but marginalized, English-speaking peoples, new groups such as the managerial class, foreign students, entrepreneurs, and refugees from the Vietnam War required a reconception of the field. Asian American studies thus moved away from a pan-ethnic nationalist project to interrogating identity in what David Leiwei Li calls “difference and diaspora” (185), as exemplified by Lisa Lowe’s article “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences.” More recent scholarly work and cultural production within Asian American studies have extended this trajectory of exploring difference, such as underlining the particular position of Asian Americans in Hawaii and exploring the intersection of race and sexuality.

“Claiming America” coincided with earlier ethnic nationalist differences, especially in the work of Frank Chin and the other members of the *Aiiieeeee!* group, and in Kingston’s second book, *China Men*. While the *Aiiieeeee!* group (and especially Chin) approached claiming America in the 1970s through defining Asian American masculinity against the stereotype of the effeminate Asian male (Kim 175), it was Kingston who clearly articulated the project to claim America as depicting the presence of Chinese Americans in the history of the US.<sup>1</sup> Elaine Kim, in her discussion of *China Men*, comments that the characters in this novel are less personal than in *The Woman Warrior*, but more like historical archetypes of the men who built the railroads of the US, bought land, and raised families despite exclusionary laws (208-209). Along with claiming the socio-historical place of Asian Americans in the US, claiming America also establishes Asian American presence in US literature. Li discusses Kingston’s engagement with the canon of literature at length, concluding that although some Asian American critics have accused her of pandering to popular tastes, *The Woman Warrior* ultimately created a literary space for Asian American writers (19).

Despite Kingston’s use of “claiming America” in the socio-historic sense, the term appears elastic. Kingston seems to suggest that the characters and events in *China Men* are only her own conceptions of what claiming America can be, which Kim sees as primarily concerned with claiming American history. Yet due to the shift in focus to transnationalism in the 1990s, it seems that few scholars have expanded the scope of this term. Elaine Kim discusses claiming America specifically with the *Aiiieeeee!* anthology and *China Men*, and Li takes up Kingston’s third book, *Tripmaster Monkey*. In addition, Li goes further and also

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<sup>1</sup> Kingston first used the term “claim America” to describe *China Men*, which was published more than a decade after *Aiiieeeee!*. While the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* did not use this term, Asian American critics tend to view their literary project and Kingston’s as aligned, in that they prioritize asserting a place for Asian Americans in the US, and hence I am applying “claim America” retroactively to the *Aiiieeeee!* group as well.

devotes most of a chapter in the “Claiming America” section of *Imagining the Nation* to Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine*. In this chapter, Li continues with his argument that claiming America is in part a literary claim, by demonstrating that Mukherjee’s “maximalist” writing consciously locates the novel within the literary tradition of the American romance. In addition, Li points out that the (out of character) qualities which enable Jasmine’s success as an American are “her comprehension of the multiple registers of American English,” “her ease of conversation and command of Western culture,” and “her discernment in fashion and furnishings” (94). What Li is pointing towards is that Mukherjee’s “claiming America” differs from the ethnic nationalists due to her “move toward the mainstream” (102); claiming America in this case means assimilating into American cultural practices.

Likewise, I also conceive of “claiming America” in Asian American comics as different from establishing Asian historical presence. But neither do I follow Mukherjee’s assimilationist approach. The debate between scholars who endorse an ethnic nationalist perspective and those who emphasize transnationalism often makes the issue seem either/or. Susan Koshy, in “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” disagrees with Sau-ling Wong’s statement that despite increasing differences within the Asian American community, “claiming America” should still be the community’s main project even in the 1990s, and is especially critical of Wong’s assertion that a “commitment” to America is paramount (341). I recognize that in light of transnationalism, “claiming America” would necessarily change in character. As King-Kok Cheung states, to label the emphasis on transnationalism as a “shift” is inaccurate; “The two phases of Asian American cultural criticism may more accurately be characterised as a dialectic that continues to spark debate” (1). I argue that claiming America and transnationalism/multiplicity may not even be so different as to constitute a dialectic, which by definition refers to a pair of oppositions. If Mukherjee “claims America” by showing an immigrant’s social mobility through her knowledge of American practices, then the reciprocal event can also be conceived of as claiming America – immigrants and transnationals retaining ties to their homeland but changing the culture of the US. Within Asian American comics, both reciprocal processes occur: Asian Americans engage with American popular culture and move toward the mainstream, yet what is “mainstream” (or “popular”) in American culture also changes due to Asian American presence. Essentially, claiming America may no longer follow the “‘no-no’ manoeuvre” but rather “‘yes-yes’” (Li 46).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The term “no-no boy” originally referred to Japanese American men during WWII who answered “no” to both the survey questions of whether they would unquestioningly serve in the American military and whether they would forswear their loyalty to Japan. These men believed that answering “yes” to the first question would mean that they may be drafted into the army, and answering “yes” to the second question would imply that they had any previous loyalty to Japan (most were second or third generation Japanese Americans and had no ties to Japan). Subsequently, the term “no-no” came to refer to Asian Americans identifying neither with Asians

### **Asian American Studies and Popular Culture**

Li discusses Asian Americans seeking ties with Asia as mostly hearkening back to family ancestry or traditions, such as Frank Chin's *The Big Aiiieeee!* evoking Chinese myths and legends and Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* tracing the maternal lineage. Increasingly, however, ties with Asia may not be ties to what is "traditional," as Asian nations have been undergoing enormous technological and economic expansion that has caused David Palumbo-Liu to ask: "Has Asia arrived at the twenty-first century *before* America? How has Asia leapfrogged ahead of the United States" into a condition of postmodernity? (337) Palumbo-Liu, in the last chapter of *Asian / America: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, argues that the rise of the Asia Pacific projects "an image both retrograde and futuristic" (361), and that "traditional Asian values" such as Confucianism are seen not as opposing capitalist expansion but rather qualities that facilitate Asia's entry into the global market. Palumbo-Liu's analysis represents a growing recognition that Asian American lives cannot be removed from the forms and influences of popular culture, and that studying popular culture may greatly further Asian American studies. I will introduce recent studies at the intersection of Asian American studies and popular culture studies, and then go on to discuss the relevance that different theories of popular culture have for Asian American criticism.

Two recent collections of articles, *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture* and *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, show that Asian American entry into "real" American culture is increasingly a scholarly concern. Nguyen and Tu, the editors of *Alien Encounters*, write that the most basic premise behind the collection is "the obvious, though often unacknowledged, assertion that Asian Americans are not 'outside' of popular culture – whether or not we are imagined by it – and that popular culture is important to the ways in which Asian Americans move (or are not allowed to move) through the world" (3). Indeed, many Asian American artists and writers have undertaken projects that spring from a need to refute popular stereotypes. Robert G. Lee's book, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, traces the socioeconomic origins of Asian stereotypes from the 1850s to the 1990s, and their dissemination through popular media such as newspapers, minstrel songs, and films. The emphasis on dissemination via popular media is especially important, as media enables the consolidation of a nation's imagined community (what Lee calls "'real' Americans"); and for Asian Americans, such national consolidation often occurs apart from them and at their expense. Lee cites the *Life* article at the beginning of WWII teaching (presumably white) American citizens how to tell the difference between Japanese and Chinese people (147), labelling photos the "Short Japanese

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nor Americans but opting for a unique Asian American identity. Li uses this term to describe Frank Chin's attitude, and uses "yes-yes" to refer to Kingston's approach in embracing both an Asian identity and an American one.

Admiral” or the “Tall Chinese Brothers” (148). As such, popular American representations of Asian Americans as Other have concrete consequences for national inclusion. To counter these popular representations and assert the presence of Asian Americans in the US would require cultural production on the same level, the level of popular culture.

### **Theories of Popular Culture**

Just as “Asian American” has shifted under different conceptual frameworks, the understanding of “popular culture” has also undergone great changes. Popular culture could just mean the cultural practices and texts that a vast number of people engage with, in line with Raymond Williams's characterization of the “popular” as “well-liked by many people” or “made for the people by themselves” (Storey, *An Introductory Guide* 6). While this is a neutral definition, critics have often viewed popular culture negatively. In Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry thesis, popular culture is produced mechanically, with profit as the goal of production. Mechanical production results in standardization (or at least standardized categories), and hence consumers are being made more and more homogenous (Horkheimer and Adorno 63). Moreover, serious reflection is discouraged, in part because standardization delivers the same pattern repeatedly and also because time spent in reflection is time apart from consumption (45). In many ways, the culture industry thesis fits into Louis Althusser's description of an ideological state apparatus. They are social systems that maintain norms through hegemony rather than through force. As I mentioned, many Asian American writers first set out to dispel stereotypes against them, which were circulated in popular media. The perpetuation of ethnic stereotypes in America today can be seen as an outcome of a culture industry which tries to appeal to the greatest number of consumers, which historically have been White Americans, while ignoring protests of less numerous outliers.

Horkheimer and Adorno's and Althusser's theories gained prominence in the 1970s, and have since then been criticized for their pessimism and their lack of faith in individual agency. John Fiske, a prominent popular culture theorist, argues that while culture is commodified and standardized, consumers are active in personalizing products and reading cultural texts selectively according to individual preferences. Essentially, Fiske locates the production of popular culture in consumers, and culture industries only produce the materials out of which popular culture is made (23-24). This shift in agency is political because it means that resistance is possible. Fiske's ideas also support one area of popular culture studies, which is the study of subcultures and countercultures. While counterculture tries to be radical and oppose the mainstream outright, subcultures are defined often as smaller groups within popular culture which participate in the mainstream but also in a different lifestyle, or alter the signs of mainstream culture to express a different aesthetic. While the definition of subcultures has rarely been applied to communities of ethnic minorities, I will argue that Asian Americans can potentially constitute subcultures through their engagement but

disagreement with mainstream American popular culture, both as a collective Asian American community and as various Asian ethnic communities.

The view that consumers purposefully misread and alter popular culture products and texts also has basis in conceptualizing popular culture as an expression of postmodernity. In *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, Hebdige writes that postmodernity “challenges the validity of the kind of global, unilinear version of artistic and economic-technological development...and instead concentrates on what gets left out, marginalized, repressed or buried” (185). Included in this broad outlook is the idea that there is no authentic and unified subject (189) or authoritative and “original” text (191). Postmodernity opens cultural production up to play, and therefore pastiche, allegory, simulation, and parody proliferate in popular culture (191). The properties of postmodernity are especially valuable in investigating the cultural products of ethnic minorities. Indeed, Hebdige writes that the student protests of the 1960s were postmodern challenges to totalization and teleology (186). One concern that scholars have had with Asian Americans grappling with stereotypes in popular culture is that it is easy to fall into the trap of iterating what is “real” and “true” about Asian Americans. This essentialism is especially problematic in a time when poststructuralist emphases on diaspora and transnationalism have called essential identities into question, and Asian American critics have specifically called attention to the fact that Asian American subjectivity is also created through epistemological discourses (Chuh 9). The authors in *East Main Street* and *Alien Encounters* are well aware that there is no single definition of “Asian,” and they do not automatically assume that mainstream American use of Asian and Asian American images and products as error-prone, racist, and in need of correction. Similarly, the works I am examining rarely polemically assert the “truth” regarding Asian American communities, but rather engage in their own postmodern play with mainstream misrepresentations.

Another recent focus of popular culture studies is on the new patterns of popular culture flow due to globalization. John Storey writes that the dominant view of globalization is one of homogenization, where American popular culture products such as jeans and McDonald’s spread over the world and destroy other cultures (*Inventing Popular Culture* 109). Like the culture industry thesis, this view fails to take into account consumer agency. Critics such as Arjun Appadurai and Jan Nederveen Pieterse have recognized that rather than resulting in uniformity, the spread of American popular culture to other countries has resulted in hybridization. In addition, since the 1990s, there have been numerous writings on Japan as a popular culture producer.<sup>3</sup> There is also growing awareness of South Korea, China, and India as the centres of both technological and cultural export. As I have mentioned, transnational lifestyles and available technology enable Asian Americans to keep in touch with ongoing popular culture of their countries

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<sup>3</sup>For example, prominent scholars studying Japanese popular culture are Susan Napier, Koichi Iwabuchi, John Lent, and Mark Shilling.

of origin. Hence, an interest in Asian popular culture is fertile ground to explore how Asian popular culture transfers into being Asian American culture and American popular culture.

For example, *anime* (Japanese animated cartoons) and Asian comic books were once only sold in Chinatown and Japantown bookstores in North America for Asian North American audiences, but have now progressed to being translated into English and sold in major mainstream bookstores, even inspiring North American imitators. In the process, such media forms have changed status from being ethnic subculture to being aspects of mainstream popular culture. As Stuart Hall writes, the study of popular culture is not simply descriptive, but ultimately concerned with questions of power (483) – the limits of cultural consent, what personal or local agency is possible within the culture industry and globalization. These concerns are similar to those in studies of ethnic minority culture, as both fields mean to afford greater social power to subordinate groups.

### Comics

I have already mentioned that it may be important for Asian Americans to engage with popular culture through a form of popular culture. More specifically, I believe that engaging with visual media is essential as minorities are often excluded from the nation because of visible markers of racial difference. For example, Robert Lee argues that while minstrelsy attacked both early Chinese and early Irish immigrants to the US, Irish Americans were able to achieve American status because their White appearance made them easier to incorporate into the national body (70). Articles such as “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese” have foregrounded visual difference as the basis for inclusion or exclusion, and comics have been used in the US to depict foreign villains. In “OK, Axis, Here We Come!” Don Thompson includes covers of WWII era superhero comics, which depict caricatures of Hitler and the Nazis and bucktoothed, slanty-eyed Japanese soldiers<sup>4</sup>. One cover also includes the “Young Allies” being held captive by a monstrous dragon-like creature on top of a pedestal bearing swastika symbols and made-up Japanese characters (images unpaginated, 128-129). As Charles Johnson writes in the introduction to *Black Images in the Comics*, American comics have shown “risible yet demeaning images of all racial others” (9-10). Materials such as “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese” and WWII comic books are examples from the culture industry in times of national crisis, when paranoia pushed visible racial difference to absurd levels of emphasis.

In *Orientalism*, Lee examines films such as *Broken Blossoms*, *Bladerunner* and *Year of the Dragon* as variously showcasing “the six faces of the Oriental” –

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<sup>4</sup> It may be argued that since the covers show Japanese people and not Japanese Americans, it would be misleading to use these comics as examples of the US’s perspective of Japanese Americans. While other scholars and I recognize this, it is exactly this conflation that the US has failed to avoid, which led to the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII. This problem is still pervasive; one *Secret Asian Man* comic shows a librarian telling Sam to look in the General History of the Far East section for Asian American biographies (090402)



the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook (8). In addition, the films also visually present the material environments of Asian Americans, such as the smoky and decadent opium dens of Chinatown. Ultimately, most of popular Hollywood cinema that has featured Asian characters has not given such characters the status of the lead, and much earlier cinema featured Asian characters played by White actors. Tasha G. Oren, in discussing such films, uses Murray Smith's model of "levels of engagement," where "alignment" refers to "the way a film gives us access to the actions, thoughts, and feelings of characters," and "allegiance...concerns the way a film attempts to marshal out sympathies for or against various characters" (354-355). Oren's argument is that while films may have ceased figuring Asian Americans as the complete Other and have begun to marshal sympathies for them, the alignment of the audience still runs with the lead White male character<sup>5</sup>. Although a multitude of factors affect this tendency, I believe that a significant factor is that the cost of film production in a capitalist economy requires that the films are watched by the greatest number of people possible to make profit, and therefore its narrative and characters are written to fit the outlook of the majority and the dominant ideologies (Fiske 28). Indeed, Horkheimer and Adorno hold film to be an exemplary medium in the culture industry (45). In addition, until recently, Asian Americans have not participated greatly at any level of film production (derived, for example, from comparing film credits from the 1980s to those of the 2000s. Even now, Asians names show up the most often in post-production roles).

The comic book industry is different from the film industry, with a considerably larger range in creator independence. Many early serialized comics were created in a conveyor belt fashion, with large companies such as Marvel and DC owning the rights to characters and storylines and dividing labour among writers, pencillers, inkers and letterers. However, regulations such as the Comics Code Authority limited the scope of comics,<sup>6</sup> and "underground comix" started to brew in the 1960s and 1970s to avoid censorship. These comics had smaller budgets, independent creators, and were not intended to be distributed to a wide audience or to make profit. Both types of production exist in today's comics.

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<sup>5</sup>Arguably, recent Hollywood films (perhaps with the exception of the *Harold & Kumar* films) such as *Shanghai Noon* and *The Forbidden Kingdom* feature lead Asian characters, but often the alignment in these films still resides with the White male lead. For example, although *The Forbidden Kingdom* features two Asian martial arts masters (played by Jackie Chan and Jet Li), the story is focused more on the personal growth of Jason Tripitikas, a White teenager. In addition, the management roles in these films are often not filled by Asian Americans.

<sup>6</sup>Comics had previously been sold along with other magazines, and the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was implemented in 1954 as a measure against content deemed offensive, such as violence, sexuality, drug use, and horror. Comics had to be reviewed and bear the "seal of approval" on their covers to be distributed widely with other magazines and newspapers. While the CCA is still in effect, its influence is considerably less than in the 1960s and 1970s. Partly due to the change in the distribution of comics to direct market stores, many publishers (such as Marvel) have chosen to withdraw from CCA membership or to publish independently from it and still reach their readership.

While serialized comics are still being produced, a significant number of contemporary titles are produced by one individual or a self-created collaborative team; in addition, webcomics have been growing in popularity and are even more independent, as they can be created on personal websites and blogs and rarely require third-party approval. Independent graphic novels today differ from those in the 60s and 70s in methods of distribution. The recent surge of interest in comics means that graphic novel production is no longer underground but arguably also a type of mass media, marketed along with other comics. Even so, the limited number of creators working on one title means that their visions are not compromised by corporate objectives, while they also take advantage of mass production and wide distribution to reach their audiences.

I argue that the latitude in the creation of comics makes comics superior to film as a visual medium to film to explore the concerns of ethnic minorities. If it is true that serialized comic books in America have tended to show demeaning images of Others, then the self representation of Asian Americans within this medium is all the more important. Arguably, there is no “authentic” Asian American representation that writers and artists are working towards; however there may be particular approaches to the portraying race and ethnicity that are elided in corporate productions. In the December issue of *American Book Review*, Viet Thanh Nguyen chose Adrian Tomine’s comic *Summer Blond* as representing where Asian American literature is headed. Nguyen writes that “the problem for an Asian American literature composed purely of the written word is that there is no formal way for it to deal with race’s visual dimension, only its narrative dimension” (“Masticating”<sup>12</sup>). It is important to add that the visual dimension of race is not only visualizations of differences in racialized bodies, but also in racialized spaces and material cultures. Comics offer a unique opportunity, not necessarily to reorient the gaze but to requalify the gaze, so as not to view Asian environments as deviant or contaminating.

Even though European and Asian comics have thrived apart from American comics, Asian Americans creating comics in the US do so within the context of American comics and their particular genres and conventions, such as the superhero comic. If “claiming America” means establishing Asian presence in American literature (as Kingston has done) and specifically engaging with American narrative forms such as the epic romance (as Mukherjee has done), then Asian American comics claim America by projecting visible Asian presence into the comic book industry and working with the medium in an American context. I shall be discussing this point at more length in Chapter 2.

### Asian American Comics

The three titles I have chosen to deal with in my thesis foreground ethnicity and grapple with issues of Asian and American popular culture most obviously. Other titles, such as Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings*, may deal with race and ethnicity but place less emphasis on popular culture; or, works such as Lela Lee’s *Angry Little Girls* and Derek Kirk Kim’s *Good As Lily* comment on

issues of gender and popular culture but do not as consistently address race and ethnicity. Still other works such as Stan Sakai's *Usagi Yojimbo* are fantastical adventure stories which do not address either race or popular culture directly (although they may raise general issues such as discrimination). I have also excluded one relevant title, *Re-Gifters*, which deals with the Korean American Dik Seong Jen (Dixie) and her personal growth in pursuit of a hapkido championship, on the grounds that while it was drawn by Asian American artists, it was written by a White author from Great Britain. While I will limit my thesis to examining the three titles primarily, I will mention other Asian American comics as supporting sources.

*American Born Chinese* is organized into three seemingly separate narratives, one a reworking of the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* and featuring the Monkey King, one about the American-born Chinese Jin Wang and his experiences in a largely White suburban elementary school, and a third about a White teenager named Danny, who is visited by a cousin named Chin-kee, a character that embodies many stereotypes of Asian Americans. The three separate narratives come together towards the end of the comic, where it is revealed that Jin accepts a chance to magically turn himself White, and subsequently calls himself Danny; Chin-kee is actually the Monkey King in disguise, who visits Jin/Danny to serve as his conscience. The Monkey King reveals himself and Danny reverts to Jin, and Jin reconciles himself with his Chinese American identity.

*Johnny Hiro* includes five comic book issues and ten bonus comic strips about Hiro,<sup>7</sup> who works as a busboy in a sushi restaurant in New York, and his girlfriend Mayumi. The stories largely focus on Hiro's misadventures. The first issue, "Big Lizard in My Backyard," shows "Gozadilla" coming to New York to capture Mayumi because her mother was instrumental in defeating it in Tokyo in 1978. The damage that Gozadilla does to Hiro and Mayumi's apartment is resolved in the last issue, "The Comeback," where the landlord takes Hiro and Mayumi to court, and their trial is presided over by Judge Judy. In between these issues, "Lobster Run" follows Hiro as his employer, Mr. Masago, commands him to steal a lobster from another sushi restaurant so that their lack of lobsters would not result in a negative restaurant review from Jeffrey Steingarten, that food editor for *Vogue*. "Let's Go to the Opera" shows Hiro and Mayumi being entangled in an assassination attempt targeting Hiro's friend Toshi Yamagoto at the Metropolitan Opera. "Smack My Fish Up" goes from Mr. Masago's daydream of catching the world's biggest tuna to Hiro sorting out a missing delivery at Hunt's Point Fish Market. As most of these stories show Hiro interacting with at least one popular culture figure or popular local, *Johnny Hiro* contains many embedded commentaries on Asian American interactions with popular culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Most of the characters in the comic call Johnny Hiro "Hiro," other than his parents, who call him "John." This is possibly based on the Japanese practice of referring to others by their family names. I will also be referring to Johnny Hiro as "Hiro."

Lastly, *Secret Asian Man* features the Japanese-American Osamu “Sam” Takahashi and his family and friends, as they negotiate issues of ethnicity in their daily lives and comment upon American media. *Secret Asian Man* comic strips are also largely self-contained, though they do follow an overarching progression of time; for example, Sam’s wife Marie was not in the earlier comic strips, and together they have had two children since they were first married. While he drew daily comics for United Features Syndicate from July 2007 to September 2009, Tak Toyoshima continued to post weekly comics on the *Secret Asian Man* website. For my thesis, I will be dealing with the comic strips online, which extend as far back as 2003, rather than the newspaper comics during the two-year period with United Features.

I am aware that the three titles I have chosen are works by male creators and feature male lead characters. The comic book industry is slightly different from the written book industry in that historically, Marvel Comics and DC Comics have slowly subsumed smaller publishers and put forth comics mostly within the superhero, action, or mystery genres (McAllister 19). While many Asian American females may have grown up reading Asian comics, Asian American readers of mainstream American comics would mostly have been males. It is perhaps due to this that in the area of Asian American comic book creators, males outnumber females. For my thesis in particular, I would like to address the superhero as one important avenue in claiming America, and this further limits my choice of works to those showing a direct engagement with heroism and superheroism.<sup>8</sup>

For this thesis, I shall be using the term “comics” instead of “graphic novels,” as the former includes both serialised and non-serialised titles and narratives that are not necessarily structured like novels. Of the three titles that I am examining, Gene Yang’s *American Born Chinese*, Fred Chao’s *Johnny Hiro*, and Tak Toyoshima’s *Secret Asian Man*, only *American Born Chinese* is strictly a graphic novel. *Johnny Hiro* is a collected volume with five comics of roughly thirty pages each, which were published separately, and a “Bonus Material” section containing comic strips<sup>9</sup>. Each short comic in *Johnny Hiro* (which I will refer to as “chapters”) tells a separate story, and Fred Chao is planning to continue the series with more short comics in the future. *Secret Asian Man* began in 1999 in alternative newspapers such as *Boston’s Weekly Dig* and *AsianWeek*, has been syndicated by United Features Syndicate as a daily strip, and currently runs weekly in *Honolulu Star*.<sup>10</sup> Although I did not select these titles on the basis of

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<sup>8</sup> While Asian American and Asian superheroines do not make significant appearances in the three comics that I am examining, I will point towards current efforts to represent Asian American women and girls in other titles.

<sup>9</sup> The collected volume of *Johnny Hiro* is unpaginated. I will cite the title of the short comic or the comic strip.

<sup>10</sup> While he drew daily comics for United Features Syndicate from July 2007 to September 2009, Tak Toyoshima continued to post weekly comics on the *Secret Asian Man* website. For my thesis,

their varied publication processes, that an active engagement with popular culture exists in these diverse forms of comics strengthens my position that this is a pressing concern in popular literary production.

### Summary of Chapters

In Chapter 1, I will be exploring the ways in which *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro*, and *Secret Asian Man* negotiate with mainstream popular culture and Asian American representation. On the one hand, popular culture has been extremely inhospitable towards ethnic minorities and has often presented stereotypes, but on the other hand, due to the close connection between American popular culture and national consciousness, Asian Americans cannot renounce popular culture fully, as claiming a space for Asian Americans in popular culture may result in greater acceptance. I will be examining the ways in which Asian American comics engage with various mainstream media genres such as culinary shows, popular music, and sitcoms to critique the underrepresentation or misrepresentation of Asian Americans. In addition, these comics also grapple with issues such as race-neutral representation and the place of alternative Asian American media. I will argue that Asian American comics can be seen as a part of an ethnic subculture, which challenges the mainstream through play and not necessarily through straightforward resistance.

Chapter 2 will focus on comics as one medium within popular culture which inhabits both the mainstream and the periphery. Claiming a space for Asian Americans in comics allows creators to take advantage of the social position of comics to reflect upon the US from many different angles. In addition, I will pay particular attention to hybridity of image and text in comics to tell stories unique to hybrid Asian American experiences. One section of Chapter 2 will focus specifically on the ways in which *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro* and *Secret Asian Man* interact with conventions of superhero comics. Keith Chow, an editor of *Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology*, views tales about superheroes as having special relevance to the Asian American population, because they are narratives about “geeks turning into Gods. They're about aliens mainstreaming into American culture...or soaring high above it” (Yang et al. 1). Given the contradictory history of Asians portrayed and perceived as effeminate and nerdy (Lee 85), or mysterious masters of martial arts, narratives such as the legend of the Monkey King in *American Born Chinese* and the catch phrase for *Johnny Hiro* as “Half Asian, All Hero” (Chao 3) develop ideas of Asian heroism; they both contest and claim a place in the popular superhero narratives of America.

In Chapter 3, I will focus on the depiction of American popular culture products alongside Asian popular culture products as an assertion of Asia's role in the popular culture of the U.S. In recent years, critics have recognized that Asia

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I will be dealing with the comic strips online, which extend as far back as 2003, rather than the newspaper comics during the two-year period with United Features.

no longer exclusively represents the locus of traditional values for the West. Not only is Asia the site of economic expansion (Palumbo-Liu 362, 372), it is increasingly a cultural exporter (Iwabuchi 2). By presenting the popular culture of young Asian Americans, the graphic novel authors contest the notion of popular culture and globalization as exclusively Americanization, and emphasize the presence of Asian media and products in the United States. In addition, Asian popular culture figures such as Transformers in *American Born Chinese* and “Gozadilla” in *Johnny Hiro* create nexuses of Asian American identification and present elements of Asian popular culture as components of Asian American identities alternative to mainstream American popular culture. As an Asian American comic, *Secret Asian Man* is also uniquely positioned to question the consequences of globalization for Asians.

Whether it is the stories these comics tell or the context of their publication, Asian American comics in recent years point to a movement of claiming America by occupying the space of American popular culture. Asian American graphic narratives work against the exclusion and stereotyping present in earlier American media, at once appropriating American popular culture and asserting Asian popular culture in America. By virtue of their comics’ publication, Asian American creators are seizing upon a rising popular American media form to undercut the tradition of White cartoonists creating work for a White audience, where characters of ethnic minorities are incidental or exoticized. I hope that this project will help illuminate the complex negotiation that takes place within popular culture in creating a space for the Asian American minority.

## Chapter 1

*American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro*, and *Secret Asian Man* share the outlook that to claim America means that Asian Americans need to be represented in popular culture in addition to other social areas such as politics and education. As with the earlier work of ethnic nationalists, these three comics are claiming a space within American popular culture by reconsidering the Asian American stereotypes, which, as I will show, implicitly exclude Asian American participation in mainstream popular culture. Because stereotypes circulate in popular media, these comics comment directly on various media forms such as the sitcom, culinary shows, and rap music at the same time as they project alternative images of Asian Americans through their own popular medium. Notably, the creators of these works recognize that questions of Asian American representation are not resolved simply upon inclusion in popular culture, nor can negative stereotypes be dispelled simply by asserting positive images or by making appeals to “authenticity.” Hence, along with firm criticisms of mainstream media, Asian American comics also grapple with questions of performance, racial consciousness in the media, and alliances among US ethnic minorities.

One area where popular culture plays a critical role in shaping racialized identities in the US is when it intersects with the law. Often, legal understandings of race and ethnicity are based on the “common sense” perpetuated by popular culture (Lee 5). For example, the Supreme Court denied Japanese immigrant Takao Ozawa the right to be a naturalized American citizen in 1922 based on the common sense understanding at the time that race depends not only on skin colour, but also on “blood,” or ancestry (Lee 2). However, a year later the Supreme Court revoked the US citizenship of Bhagat Singh Thind, even though Thind could prove that he was a high-caste Hindu and was White both in terms of skin colour *and* “blood,” based on the argument that race is a social construction, which was another popular understanding of race (Lee 5). The last issue of *Johnny Hiro* speaks to the extent that law and popular culture go hand in hand. After the giant lizard “Gozadilla” destroys Hiro and Mayumi’s apartment in the first issue, New York Mayor David Bloomberg asks them to cover up the truth to protect New York’s reputation. However, their landlord, Richard Delson, does not believe their story that the damage was due to party crashers, and sues them (“The Comeback”). The pro tem judge for their case is Judge Judy. This is significant as *Judge Judy* and other reality court shows in the US are programs where popular culture and law intersect. As Palmer observes, “Judge TV directs our attention to the individual’s moral responsibilities at a time when the definitions of ‘citizenship’ are changing” (128), and judges on television have great cultural authority because they often reinforce audience common sense (136).

Although the case pertains to the damaged apartment, more broadly Hiro and Mayumi’s trial reflects the battle for Asian Americans to live in the US. The court is not sympathetic to Hiro and Mayumi; Judge Judy makes fun of Hiro’s name, and the prosecuting attorney jokes that the case smells fishy because Hiro

works in a sushi restaurant. At the end of the issue, Mayumi phones Mayor Bloomberg to ask for help. Hiro reveals to the Mayor that Delson had accused them of being dirty people and bringing in cockroaches and mice, refused to repair their pipes or reimburse them for hiring a plumber, and gave them a hard time when they were trying to renew their lease. The mayor concludes that because the area had been gentrifying, their landlord was harassing tenants and trying to push them out. Their landlord's actions reflect the long-standing prejudice that Asian immigrants to the US are pollutants. Lee argues that the US could no longer see Asians as the exotic "Orientals" of a faraway land once they settled in the US, but as representing looming industrialization taking over pastoral America, and therefore came to fear Asians and label them as pollutants (31-32). In a similar way, Hiro and Mayumi are painted as racialized and working class people who are intruding into bounded bourgeois communities.

Hiro and Mayumi's trial is not televised, and arguably their case does not differ from a trial with any other judge. However, Judge Judy has a specific television persona which Chao references by featuring her as a character. Palmer points out that her mission is to shift the blame for crimes back onto individuals instead of considering their socio-political framework (138), a perspective which produces discourses such as the model minority myth and proves extremely harmful to ethnic minorities. Judge Judy's decisions on her program are legally binding; in addition to creating legal precedents, she is also teaching thousands of television audiences how to think about social issues. "The Comeback" invites readers to subvert Judge Judy's authority by aligning themselves with the courtroom audience, who say amongst themselves, "I prefer Joe Brown," and "God, I hate this show." Because popular culture runs so closely to law, by satirizing Judge Judy as a popular culture figure, Chao is by extension satirizing her as a legal and political figure and her social perspectives. Moreover, Chao creates a story where Judge Judy does not have the ultimate authority. It is Mayumi and Hiro, with their personal access to Mayor Bloomberg, who win the case; their landlord drops his charges.<sup>11</sup> By having Hiro and Mayumi win the case with Judge Judy, Chao is writing Asian Americans into both the law and popular culture. *Judge Judy* is the best example of the intersection between law and popular culture in setting up signposts for social conduct, but Lee is correct that popular culture overall has a guiding function for society and is an important component for who "counts" in the national community.

### **The Model Minority Stereotype**

One underlying concern of all three texts is the pervasive stereotypes against Asians in popular culture. Before discussing them in relation to each of the three texts I am examining, I would like to explore the implications of

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<sup>11</sup> While Hiro and Mayumi's case can be representative of Asian American struggles for equal places in the US, the intervention of Mayor Bloomberg does not reflect the political access of most ethnic minorities. As I will discuss further in Chapter 2, the short story format of *Johnny Hiro* issues may limit complexities in the narrative.



stereotypes on Asian American participation in popular culture in general. Lee summarises six major stereotypes against Asian Americans: the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook (8), which correspond to specific stages in Asian American history but also persist together. I argue that while the six stereotypes that Lee raises have all functioned to keep Asians from participating in the American nation, the model minority stereotype is the most relevant to considerations of Asian American engagement with American popular culture. For example, Lee identifies the pollutant figure as born out of anxieties towards industrialization, and the deviant figure as shaped by the fears reinforced by a rigid Victorian sexuality. In these two stereotypes, then, the primary social areas concerned have been work and sexuality or family. The model minority discourse also focuses on the high work ethic of Asian Americans, but its formulation rests on a binary opposition between work and leisure.

The model minority discourse seems to praise Asian Americans for succeeding economically in the US, based on supposed traditional Asian values such as hard work and thrift, which are seen to align with the Protestant work ethic (Osajima 166). However, Keith Osajima argues that this discourse indirectly blames other ethnic minorities (especially African Americans) for not being able to achieve the same success as Asian Americans, which ignores the social factors contributing to gaps between US populations, and divides ethnic minorities by pitting them against one another (167). Moreover, numerous scholars have recognized that viewing Asians as the model minority could quickly deteriorate into a renewed conception of Asian Americans as the yellow peril—for example, by accusing Asian Americans of taking places in higher education and professional positions away from other Americans (Ono and Pham 86).

While scholars such as Lee recognize that the model minority discourse makes Asian Americans assimilable into the mainstream but promotes their political silence (145), most writers have not recognized that it also renders Asian Americans silent in popular culture. The assimilation, as Osajima's choice of words shows, is limited to "the *educational* and *economic* mainstream" (169, emphasis added). With the broad definition of "popular culture" as involving all everyday materials and practices, perhaps no one could avoid participating in popular culture. However, assigning values such as thrift and hard work to Asian Americans portrays them as excellent American producers but rules them out as American consumers and especially as consumers of leisure. This is problematic, as many of the contested stereotypes of Asian Americans arise from popular media such as film and television, which are consumer products. Also, forms of entertainment outside of capitalist systems, such as early minstrelsy considered by Lee, are still forms of leisure activity and entertainment.<sup>12</sup> The model minority

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<sup>12</sup> As O'Brien and Szeman write in *Popular Culture: A User's Guide*, industrialization resulted in a division of work and leisure, with leisure to a certain extent controlled by ruling classes so that the working classes would not rebel (25-26). Currently, popular culture most often denotes practices and texts in leisure. Without this demarcation between leisure and work, neither the

myth makes Asian American representation in popular culture irrelevant to the mainstream, based on the assumption that Asian Americans would not access the media or leisure activities anyway.<sup>13</sup> The *Johnny Hiro* bonus strip “Let’s Go Shopping!” shows Hiro being towed through various stores by Mayumi, who is intent on getting more clothes, but also tells Hiro that “We need to help local business and stimulate economy.” While this strip may be making fun of Mayumi’s shopaholic tendencies, it also asserts that Asian Americans also participate in American consumption and are not simply defined by hard work and thrift, as the essentialist model minority myth claims.

### **Beyond Refutation**

As the numerous popular culture stereotypes discourage Asian Americans from participating in the national community, correcting stereotypes has been a concern for much of Asian American literature, especially in the ethnic nationalist phase. For example, Frank Chin argues that the model minority is the product of “racist love” and in particular makes fears regarding Asian American men manageable for White men. Chin’s goal was to portray Asian Americans positively and authentically, especially writing Asian American men as strong and masculine, which directly contributed to his desire to claim America. However, this has been problematic; much of Asian American criticism has revealed that refuting the stereotype of the effeminate Asian American male has contributed to the continuation of patriarchal values and perpetuated gender stereotypes (Cheung 237). Asian American cultural producers have become aware that trying to debunk one stereotype may not lead to representations that are any more “authentic” or less problematic.

Of the three titles that I am examining, *American Born Chinese* features characters who are the most concerned with debunking the model minority myth, especially Jin Wang. However, *American Born Chinese* is critical of the perspective that going to popular culture to dispel the model minority myth will create a more authentic Asian American subject, and also wary of the belief that participating in popular culture will make Asian Americans more accepted. Like Chin, Jin also tries to leave behind a false stereotype by constructing an image that he believes better reflects himself; however, unlike Chin, Jin is not asserting what a “real” Asian American is, but tries to subscribe to what he believes a “real” American is, which seems to be someone well-versed in popular culture. Wei-chen tells Amelia that Jin shows him “how things work in America,” saying “he help with my English. He teach me hip English phrases like ‘don’t have a cow, man,’ and... ‘word to your mother’...he take me to McDonald’s and buy me French fries” (Yang 102).

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model minority discourse nor the current focus of popular culture would have been formulated in the same way.

<sup>13</sup> Recently, commercials in particular are beginning to feature more Asian and African Americans, which I argue is motivated as much by markets recognizing that ethnic minorities are consumers as by concerns for politically correct representation.

In particular, Jin is eager to shake off his parents' emphasis on studying and begin dating. He narrates that his mother married his father based on his thick glasses, which means a strong work ethic and hence the ability to support a family, a philosophy that Jin is not eager to adopt. In addition, Jin is forbidden to date until he obtains at least a master's degree (Yang 163). He also sets himself apart from Wei-chen, who says that in Taiwan, if people fall in love before eighteen years old, everyone laughs at them. Jin calls Wei-chen an F.O.B.<sup>14</sup> and says that America is not the same as Taiwan (89). Notably, Jin is not interested in Suzy Nakamura, the only other Asian American at Mayflower elementary, as other children at first think them related and then spread rumours that they would be married right after elementary school. Jin narrates that they avoided each other as much as possible (31).<sup>15</sup> Rather, Jin is attracted to Amelia, a White classmate. In setting himself apart from his parents' teachings, as well as from Wei-chen and Suzy, Jin is distancing himself from what he believes is their associations with Asianness. By calling Wei-chen an F.O.B., Jin is implying that he himself is somehow more of a "real American" than Wei-chen, and by avoiding Suzy, Jin seems to believe that he is challenging the false rumours his classmates are spreading. Jin's interest in Amelia but not Suzy can be read as his bid to be included in the mainstream, which fits with the significance of inter-racial romance in much Asian American literature. For example, David Leiwei Li writes that in Mukherjee's novel, Jasmine's White partners stand in for masculine characterizations of the US, and hence enable Mukherjee to explore Jasmine's gradual incorporation into the national body (Li 97).<sup>16</sup>

However, Yang also shows the limits of assimilation through interracial romance. Amelia's friend Greg explains to Jin that dating Amelia may ruin her image in high school (179), and later also says to Amelia that Jin seems like a geek (184). I have mentioned that Ono and Pham have noted how the model minority discourse can shore up the idea of Asian Americans as the yellow peril. Also, Lee notes that the model minority could be figured as the gook, a derogatory term used to describe Vietnamese and Korean insurgents in Asia, and sometimes applied to all people of Asian descent. These analyses reveal how

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<sup>14</sup> Acronym for "fresh off the boat," a derogatory term for new immigrants.

<sup>15</sup> While the narrative focuses on Jin, it also portrays Suzy sympathetically. She is not relegated to the narrow role of being a girl Jin is not interested in her romantically, but shares her reflections on being an Asian American as well. For example, she says that although she appears well-adjusted, deep down she often feels embarrassed about being Asian American (Yang 187). She and Wei-Chen are also foils to Jin. They begin dating after Jin tells Wei-chen that Americans date as teenagers, which suggests that they do not completely reject their Asian American identities, as Jin does.

<sup>16</sup> Despite whatever motivations Jin has for dating Amelia, Yang shows that their relationship is a positive one. Amelia accepts Jin's offer to go on a date and their date goes reasonably well. Hence, Yang is not suggesting that Jin is unattractive as an Asian American; rather, Amelia liking Jin draws attention to the prejudice of Jin's other White classmates and Jin's own misguided belief that he needs to be a "real American." Yang is not criticizing all inter-racial relationships but rather the biases that may drive or impede them.

stereotypes against Asian Americans could be interchangeable, even if some may seem complimentary. Yang seems to recognize this phenomenon. Despite trying to participate in popular culture, dating Amelia, and even perming his hair to look more like Greg, Jin is figured as a schoolyard version of the yellow peril, as someone who would ruin Amelia's reputation. Greg's objection to Jin dating Amelia reveals Greg's biases but also highlights the point that Jin's attempt to gain acceptance by fitting into the mainstream is misguided.

Jin's transformation into Danny, a White teenager, is the ultimate bid to fit into the mainstream. However he is visited again and again by his "cousin" Chin-kee, who is the embodiment of all the stereotypes associated with Asian Americans, such as being a know-it-all in class, eating cats, and speaking in an exaggerated accent. As Danny, Jin does not find his romantic problems solved; his new love interest, Melanie, still rejects him.<sup>17</sup> What *American Born Chinese* seems to suggest is not that Asian Americans can never be free from stereotypes, but as happened with Frank Chin, trying too hard to shake off stereotypes may lead to a re-instatement of other stereotypes. In addition, the Chin-kee segments of *American Born Chinese* also question the image of a "real American" that Jin wishes to adopt. Chin-kee and Danny's narrative is presented as a comic book rendering of a sitcom, accompanied by a laugh track under many of the panels. As I will discuss further on in this chapter, the sitcom often uses stereotypes to generate humour. Chin-kee is the most obvious representation of the stereotypes that Jin/Danny cannot shake off, but the sitcom format suggests that Jin's idea of what a mainstream American should be is just as staged as Chin-kee seems to be. Danny's life is indeed very much a teen sitcom, with concerns such as romance dramas and getting onto school sports teams. The character of Steve, who is in the Oliphant High School basketball team, is represented as a stereotypical "jock." He is heavily built and resorts to violence. For example, he tells Danny that he broke another student's nose for calling him names, and offers to do the same to anyone who teases Danny about Chin-kee. Eager to maintain his social image, Danny fails to recognize the harm in this proposal and thanks Steve (Yang 128). Rather than claiming a place for Asian Americans in the mainstream like the work of early ethnic nationalists, Yang argues that the desire for Asian Americans to be represented in the mainstream is suspect because the mainstream itself is a construction, and not any more valid than any other constructions of ethnic identity. In Chapter 3, I will discuss how *American Born Chinese* suggests the alternative of Asian and Asian American popular culture as a component to structure identity.

### **Negotiating Asian America Food Culture**

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<sup>17</sup> Specifically, Chin-kee singing "She Bangs" like the American Idol contestant William Hung later in the comic indirectly critiques Jin trying to assume a White American identity and pursue White girls. I will discuss Chin-kee as William Hung further on in this chapter.

Lee notes the idea of the outsider pollutant is distilled in concerns over food, as concerns over healthy food intake into the physical body become a symbol for maintaining the health of the national body (38). Going from *American Born Chinese* to *Johnny Hiro*, readers can see a transition from “ethnic” foods being associated with pollution to being seen as positively associated with cosmopolitanism. In this section, I will examine how the shift in representations of Asian food, especially in mainstream media, results in acceptance for Asian Americans, but cannot be removed from larger issues of popular consumerism and hegemony. I will also show how *Johnny Hiro* comments on mainstream representations of Asian American food.

Along with considerations of the model minority myth, *American Born Chinese* also shows that the image of Asian Americans as pollutants still thrives. Timmy, the ringleader of Jin’s tormenters, tells the class and their teacher that he heard from his parents that Chinese people eat dogs, and then he tells Jin during lunch to stay away from his dog (Yang 31-32). Jin never brings Chinese food to school again, but eats sandwiches. As Danny, he is mortified that Chin-kee is eating things like crispy cat gizzards with noodles (114). While American popular culture celebrates hunting and eating wild animals as feats of heroic strength, eating domesticated animals which are not raised for food, such as dogs and cats, is frowned upon (Lee 38).<sup>18</sup> By eating cat *gizzards*, Chin-kee is also crossing the line drawn between what is seen as nutritious food and what is seen as waste, compounded by his peeing into the coke of Danny’s friend Steve. In addition, in the fight between Danny and Chin-kee towards the end of the graphic novel, Chin-kee uses techniques such as “mooshu fist” and “Kung Pao attack” (208). This absurd pairing of food names and fighting seems to be symbolic of a deeper fear regarding Chinese food invading the US.

The attitude towards sushi in *Johnny Hiro* is very different. Although on the surface the representation of sushi seems to be wholly celebratory, the narrative points to tensions regarding Japanese food in the US. As I will discuss further in the next chapter, although none of the characters speaks any languages other than English, there is frequent mention of sushi-related terminology in Japanese *romaji*, indicating that sushi has been accepted enough in the mainstream that these terms would be recognized, or would at least spark interest. This was not always the case; Ted Bestor, in his conference presentation “Sushi and the Western Imagination of Japan,” cites Isabella Bird, who in 1911 described sushi as “fishy and vegetable abominations” (Bestor, “Culinary Flows, 19<sup>th</sup> Century”). Another text from 1929 on entertaining in Japanese style directly tells readers that speaking about raw fish is offensive and therefore recipes would not mention any (Bestor, “Culinary Flows, 20<sup>th</sup> Century”).

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<sup>18</sup> Lee does not go on to analyse this further, but designating certain animals as pets includes these animals in the image of the ideal middle class nuclear family. Hence, eating companion animals would be a threat to this image and to the notion of clear demarcations between what is domestic and what is not.

As America and Japan increased business interactions, sushi began to be accepted in America. Bestor notes that the Harvard club opened a sushi bar for graduates who went to Japan and came back. Therefore, in contrast to Chinese food, Japanese food has an association with the elite. Wenying Xu writes that Chinese American food<sup>19</sup> developed in part because early Chinese immigrants were barred from jobs such as mining, and had to turn to work such as farming, fishing, and cooking instead (10). In addition, for the Western imagination, the aesthetics and craftsmanship involved in sushi reflected Japanese industriousness and their attention to detail (Bestor, “Sushi is Good to Think”), again a contrast to images conjured up by Chinese American foods such as chop suey. Rather than signify pollution, sushi has come to signify a product of model citizens: healthy and aesthetically pleasing. These associations are present in *Johnny Hiro*. Hiro himself is a diligent worker, who is trying to move from bussing tables to making sushi, and Mr. Masago’s goals are to get out of debt, help his family in Japan, and pay his staff a bit more (Chao, “Lobster Run”). While one could argue that Mr. Masago and Hiro are model minority stereotypes for their work ethic, their working and financial situation also writes the Asian American working class into the production of Japanese food, which has lately been associated at least with a middle class cosmopolitanism.

Anita Mannur writes that there has recently been great interest in the US towards Asian fusion cuisine because it promises palatable otherness which can be assimilated in a harmonious way; Ming Tsai, the host and cook of his own Food Network shows, is a “hyperassimilated, attractive and yuppified Asian American” and quite unlike the “‘heathen Chinese’ stereotypes that have long been associated with Asian American men who cook” (Mannur 78). In addition to displaying food, these Asian American cooking shows are selling the idea of a society which has become egalitarian and multicultural, and selling its audience the identity of a multicultural citizen. In addition, Mannur argues that the kind of Asian fusion cuisine showcased by Food Network hosts such as Ming Tsai and Padma Lakshmi decontextualizes Asian foods from their cultural backgrounds (86) and also ignores questions of class, as the “yuppified” Ming Tsai and the exotic, cosmopolitan Padma Lakshmi eclipse the working and life conditions of most Asian Americans in the food industry (87).<sup>20</sup> Like Jin’s situation in *American Born Chinese*, the participation of Asian American chefs on Food Network does not guarantee a resolution to problems of ethnic minority representation and stereotyping.

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<sup>19</sup> I am using the term “Chinese American food” to distinguish inventions and conventions specific to Chinese food in the West, such as handing out fortune cookies, which are not present in the Chinese food in China.

<sup>20</sup> *Johnny Hiro* also suffers from a similar issue. The fact that all of the four identified workers in Mr. Masago’s House of Fish are of Japanese descent fails to reflect the fact that many Japanese restaurants in North America are operated by Chinese and Korean North Americans, an elision which simplifies a more complex picture of how different Asian ethnicities coincide with class, as well as the legacy of Japanese colonialism in Asia.

While Mannur discusses Asian fusion cuisine in terms of a gentrification of food, she does not elaborate on the commodification of identity in general. The emphasis of popular culture has changed. Lee shows that constructions of Asian American stereotypes have been historically based on the need to fend off external threats which disturb the boundaries and balances of the body, the family, and the nation. While national and economic security are being stressed today, especially after 9/11 and the recent economic downturn, it seems that wider consumerism is encouraged now in comparison to the 1800s and early 1900s. At the level of the individual, hybrid identities are not seen as threatening; rather, being able to perform multiple identities can be seen as “cool.” In the introduction to *Race and Resistance*, Nguyen argues that “American and global capitalism is succeeding in the *reification* of Asian American culture... Reification transforms human relationships into the relationships between things, originally made by humans but now seemingly independent,” and that “While Asian American political identity has enabled political resistance against racism and capitalist exploitation, Asian American cultural identity in the present moment furthers the aims of capitalism because Asian American cultural identity – and Asian American lifestyle – is both a commodity and a market at the same time” (9). In some ways, the postmodernity in popular culture that potentially opens every text to question and reinvention, and hence gives subordinate groups some authority, also results in a proliferation of borrowings that remove signs from their context and so depoliticizes them.

This is an ongoing concern for popular culture scholars, who have recognized that it might be impossible to truly be countercultural. Dick Hebdige writes that the mainstream media are attracted to the stylistic innovations of subcultures, sometimes with revulsion (91). However, the mainstream manages and incorporates subcultures and countercultures by either trivializing their difference, or taking the signs of their ideological difference and making them “meaningless exotica” that anyone can buy and display (Hebdige 94). Although ethnic groups are not often figured as a subculture or counterculture in popular culture studies, it is useful to examine them as such. The same trend of cultural incorporation can be seen in the incorporation of “ethnic” foods. For example, one comic strip from *Secret Asian Man* shows Sam’s wife Marie making a “Flavours of the World shelf” because she “finally caved into market logic” (5 June 2007, website 1), illustrating that “ethnic” foods are no longer seen as dangerous to American citizens or unclean, but are being repackaged as positive signs of difference and as signs of multiculturalism.

In *Secret Asian Man* comics in particular, Toyoshima problematizes Asian foods being subsumed into the mainstream. One comic shows Sam and Marie trying to decide between two neighbouring Chinese restaurants. Sam tells Marie that one is better than the other one because he sees actual Chinese people eating inside (10 July 2007, website 1). Sam’s comments imply that many non-Asian Americans do not consume Asian food because they are familiar with it or understand what tastes good or bad, but because it is different and exotic. At the

same time, Marie's blank look at Sam's absolute certainty invites readers to question whether there is such a simple equation between Chinese customers and "better" food. In another comic from 2003, Toyoshima celebrates Asian American Month by drawing a mock advertisement where Sam says "Don't just settle for plain ol' Chinese or Japanese" and presents forty "Oriental flavours" of ice cream, including "Cranbodian," "Laotian Blue Berry," and "Bhutan-a-rama" ("SAM\_apamonth\_0503," website 3). On one level, this strip uses irony to criticise the marketing techniques which make Asian foods into what Hebdige calls "meaningless exotica."

On another level, Toyoshima reminds readers that Asian Americans include people from countries like Cambodia, Laos, and Bhutan. This extends to food as well; just as Americans of East Asian ethnicity are often taken as representative of all Asian Americans, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian food have become more acceptable to the mainstream whereas the foods from other Asian countries have not. In addition, following Mannur's argument that upon entering the mainstream, Asian food is decontextualized from its original culture, Toyoshima also takes issue with Asian fusion cuisine. In a 2005 strip, Sam visits a fictional Chef Chan's Temple of Lemongrass, BBQ, Sushi and Bubble Tea Bar, and asks the chef, "Why is that elephant over there holding samurai swords and sitting on a jar of kimchee?" ("Asian Con-Fusion," website 3). While *Secret Asian Man* takes up issues within the entire Asian American community, the comic is conscious that pan-Asianism, which in its political context holds a good deal of potential power, may be distorted when tangled up with issues of marketing and consumption. In addition, the strip on Asian fusion cuisine points out that fragmented and hybrid identities, much celebrated as an avenue of empowerment for ethnic minorities, may become only token multiculturalism. Specifically, Toyoshima is critiquing the instances of hybridity decontextualized from political consciousness, which reinforce the stereotype that all Asians are similar, and pointing out that the casual mixing of cultural signs such as elephants and samurai swords creates an image of disjunction.

Mannur's essay regarding Asian Americans on *Food Network* is particularly interesting because it does not merely focus on Asian American food culture, but Asian American food cultures as represented on television. This means that a double consumption is taking place, where audiences consume (watch) the media production, which encourages them to cook and consume (eat) the Asian American fusion cooking. Hence, the issue of Asian American food becomes even more an issue of popular culture representation. *Johnny Hiro* also shows anxieties regarding popular media approval, especially in the chapter "Lobster Run." In this story, Jeffrey Steingarten, food editor of *Vogue* magazine, orders lobster at Masago's House of Fish, but Mr. Masago realizes that they do not have any lobsters. Telling Hiro that this could be his big break, Mr. Masago then orders him to go to a nearby sushi restaurant, Shinto Pete's, to steal a



lobster.<sup>21</sup> While humorous, Mr. Masago's anxiety about Steingarten's reviews shows the power inequality between small restaurant owners and mainstream food reviewers, and between Asian American chefs and the mainstream media that is representing them.

*Johnny Hiro* differs from culinary shows in that it adds another level of consumption in the form of the comic, and readers access Asian American cooking through Fred Chao and Hiro. Aside from Jeffrey Steingarten,<sup>22</sup> Chao introduces the figure of Alton Brown, who in real life is the host of *Good Eats* on Food Network and a commentator on *Iron Chef America*. Alton Brown is not a character in that he does not interact with any of the other characters, but appears intermittently to give interesting footnotes regarding foods featured in the comic. He first appears in "Lobster Run" to introduce the Japanese spiny lobster that Hiro is stealing. Later on in the story, when Hiro uses the lobster's claw to cut through a power line, Alton Brown explains how this could not be possible with real life Japanese spiny lobsters. However, before he finishes his comment, the author inserts Fred Chao interrupting him for interrupting the story (see figure 1). The two characters appear again to argue in "Smack My Fish Up," and these conflicts culminate in "Food Fight," a bonus comic strip. In this strip, Alton Brown bothers Chao with details about sushi fish as the latter is working on a comic page; Chao snaps, and the two men fight while insulting the cooking techniques of each other's mother. Like Jeffrey Steingarten, Alton Brown serves as a mainstream, White food connoisseur who presents himself as an authority on Mr. Masago's Japanese cooking, and on top of this he is also the critic for Fred Chao's comic book representations. Indeed, Brown's comments and their placing blend his authority on food with his critique of representation, which emphasizes that food shows such as *Padma's Passport* and Ming Tsai's *East Meets West* cannot be removed from considerations of Asian American representation. By including Alton Brown, Chao is revealing the constructedness of his own representation. However, by inserting himself as a character to argue with Alton Brown, Chao is directly questioning the supposed authority of mainstream media figures and asserting the right of Asian Americans to control their own representation.

### **Stereotypes in Mainstream Media**

Despite problems with Asian American representation on cooking shows, Asian Americans who appear on these shows can still be celebrated as having "made it." However, there are many sectors of the media where Asian American participation still remains sparse or absent, such as film, television, and popular music. In addition, Asian American representation brings new issues to light even

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<sup>21</sup> Mr. Masago explains that Hiro cannot simply buy a lobster from Shinto Pete because Pete "has too much pride" and would refuse if he hears that someone else is going to prepare his lobster.

<sup>22</sup> Steingarten does not play a major role in "Lobster Run." Hiro does manage to steal a lobster from Shinto Pete, but before Mr. Masago has a chance to prepare it, Steingarten is saved from choking by his waitress Akiko and decides to leave.

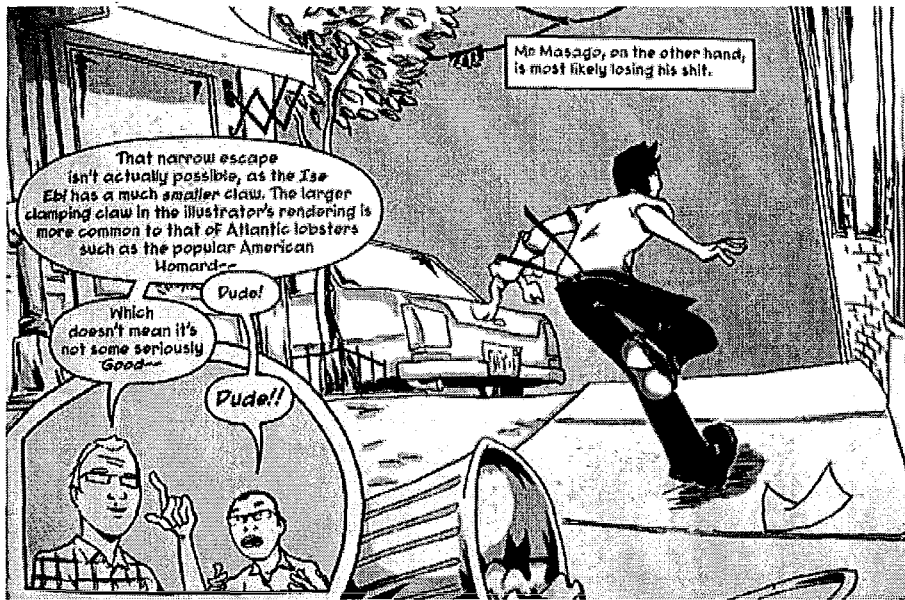


Figure 1. Fred Chao, *Johnny Hiro* (Richmond, VA: AdHouse Books: 2009). “Lobster Run.”

if it is achieved. Is it better to get a foot in the door with representations that may still rely on stereotypes, or to avoid these representations altogether? Should Asian Americans focus their efforts on participation in mainstream media, or should efforts and resources be directed more towards independent Asian American-exclusive organizations and media products? What place does Asian American representation in popular media have in relation to the representation of other ethnic minorities? *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro*, and *Secret Asian Man* take up many of these concerns, questioning mainstream practices while working through strategies that claims a place for Asian Americans in popular media but does not compromise Asian American identities and social concerns.

It is important to note that not only are Asian Americans stereotyped and portrayed negatively (for example, as villains) in popular narratives on film and television, but Asians and Asian Americans are often portrayed in a laughable manner and the narrative makes jokes at their expense. This sort of humour relegates Asian Americans to positions as outsiders *and* figures them as unimportant elements that can be laughed off. Horkheimer and Adorno write that the culture industry uses humour to keep consumers in line: “There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about. Laughter, whether reconciled or terrible, always accompanies the moment when a fear has ended... Reconciled laughter resounds with the echo of escape from power; wrong laughter copes with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire it” (54). Much of the humour resulting from ethnic stereotypes would be what Horkheimer and Adorno call “wrong” laughter. For example, Ono and Pham argue that Mr. Yuniوشي from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and Long Duk Dong from *Sixteen Candles* are Asian male characters

whose interest in the lead females is so unrealistic as to be comical, thus placating White males (72). By laughing at these Asian characters, the audience brushes off the fear associated with inter-racial romance and defects to the dominant ideology perpetuated through popular media.

Asian American comics also use humour and laughter to examine Asian American stereotypes, but do so in a considerably more complex way. As Tara Alturi writes, most studies of ethnic humour have automatically assumed that it is an expression of racism, without bothering to examine questions of performativity (198) and how performativity calls racial essentialism into question (197). In the Introduction, I mentioned that current popular culture can be seen as an expression of postmodernity, which privileges bricolage, pastiche and other decentring strategies rather than asserting a single authoritative text. Performativity is also postmodern in that it allows greater latitude in identity rather than insisting on a stable subject. In *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture*, Tina Chen argues that impersonation and performance have often been seen in Asian American criticism as being inauthentic, and authenticity has been an issue at stake because Asian Americans have been represented in an inauthentic manner (6). However, her argument is that “while Asian Americans have indeed been pressured into acts of imposture, they have through their performances wrestled with the ideologies that subject them to the charge of imposture and have struggled to make imposture something other than a mark of foreignness, secrecy, and falsehood” (7). *Secret Asian Man* and *American Born Chinese* both use the same vocabulary of comedy and performance in offensive ethnic humour to undercut its effects. On the one hand, their handling of performance sets the question of Asian American authenticity aside, and on the other hand, their manipulation of targets through humour also unsettles their textual primacy.

#### Turning the Tables: *Secret Asian Man* and Yellowvoice

Toyoshima takes issue with two incidents where Adam Carolla (on radio) and Rosie O'Donnell (on television) both mocked Asian languages with a string of “ching chong” nonsense. Toyoshima writes a satirical apology from Adam Carolla's perspective accompanied by his photograph, where Carolla says, “I just couldn't come up with anything original so I went with the cheap shot. The easiest thing in the world, when talking about Black people, is bringing up friend chicken and watermelon. Although I think that's pretty funny too” (20 June 2006, website 1). This construct of Carolla also goes on to worry about not living up to his predecessor Howard Stern and “being under that Jew's shadow.” Although the slur Carolla made was specifically directed towards Asian Americans, through this strip Toyoshima posits that the underlying problem is a general racist attitude towards all ethnic minorities. For Rosie O'Donnell, who made her joke in December 2006 on *The View*, Toyoshima draws Sam wearing a cut-out of her face over his own and wishing other Asian Americans a happy Year of the Pig (20 Feb. 2007, website 1) (see figure 2). The humorous tone of many *Secret Asian*

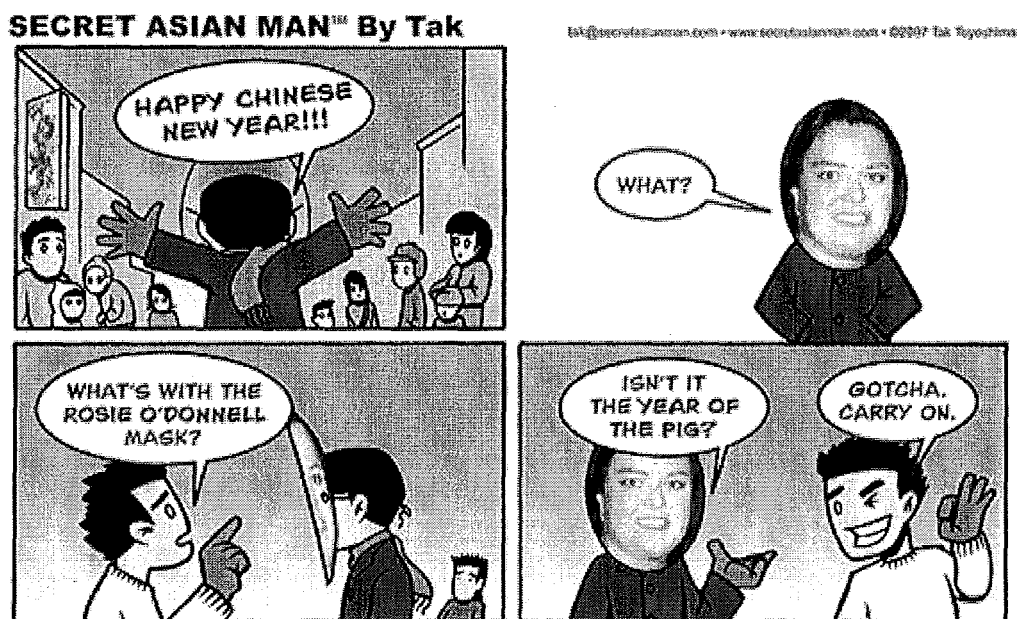


Figure 2. Tak Toyoshima, *Secret Asian Man*. 20 Feb. 2007. Web. 5 Oct. 2009.

*Man* strips is directly relevant in this case. Rosie O'Donnell and Adam Carolla intended to be funny, and ignored the racist and insulting nature of their comments.<sup>23</sup> By using humour effectively, Toyoshima is criticizing these media figures not only for their racist comments but also for their failure to be creative. As Asian and African Americans have historically been presented as characters to be laughed at, Toyoshima is more generally turning the tables on this line of ethnic humour to target Whites in mainstream popular media.

In these two media incidents, the level of the racial slur was verbal, as O'Donnell and Carolla both made fun of how Asians speak. Toyoshima's responses are in the form of comic strips and thus operate on the level of the visual. As Carolla was speaking on a radio show, he was not performing in yellowface but rather yellowvoice. Shilpa Davé writes that before television became commonplace, radio shows established the national norm through vocal inflections (319), and hence, rather than create a raceless society, early radio intensified racial differentiation (320). While listeners know that it is Carolla speaking and not Asians or Asian Americans, I argue that the lack of Carolla's bodily presence encourages listeners to attribute the "chingchong" to Asian American bodies. Toyoshima presenting a photograph of a pitiful Carolla reminds his readers that Carolla is not Asian American and had been putting on a performance. In addition, by writing the apology from Carolla's perspective, Toyoshima is using the same humorous tactic of voice appropriation to strike

<sup>23</sup> It is possible that Toyoshima is also trading insults with Rosie O'Donnell on the same level as her "ching chong" nonsense by implying that she is overweight and hence a "pig."

back. Toyoshima's handling of Rosie O'Donnell's racial slur is particularly interesting. By using O'Donnell's face over Sam's face, Toyoshima is explicitly drawing the link between her racial slur and the offensive performances of yellowface. In addition, while yellowface acting superimposes the racial construct over the real actor, in the comic strip the photograph of Rosie O'Donnell's face is imposed over Sam's cartoon face. Even if O'Donnell's face looks "real" whereas the rest of the strip is drawn, the crude cutout and Sam's performance make readers question her purported authority on television. More generally, by taking issue with both O'Donnell and Carolla, Toyoshima reveals that mainstream media productions can be subverted and opened to play and alteration.

### *American Born Chinese* and Negotiations of Self-Stereotyping

Comedic stereotypes become more problematic when they are not perpetuated by White Americans but by Asian Americans. In recent years, the most controversial Asian American trying to "make it" in mainstream popular music is William Hung, who sang "She Bangs" at *American Idol* auditions, and, after gaining huge public notoriety for his terrible performance, subsequently released three CDs. As Navarro says in "Trying to Crack the Hot 100," "Asian Americans may be expected to play the violin or know kung fu...but not necessarily to sound like Kanye West or Madonna, or sell like them" (1). While the model minority image may help television chefs such as Ming Tsai gain acceptance as a part of mainstream media, however problematically so, the image seems to be working against Asian Americans if they are trying to get into popular music at all.<sup>24</sup> The issue, then, is not that Asian Americans do not sing like mainstream pop stars, but that their performance is at odds with the image that audiences have of Asian Americans. As Hung was studying civil engineering at University of California, Berkeley, looks stereotypically Asian, and sang off-tune, many audience members have attributed his popularity to fitting the mainstream stereotype of the Asian American geek and thus being a laughingstock. In particular, *American Born Chinese* directly engages with the implications of the figure of William Hung for Asian American representation, and also comments upon the humour used in sitcoms.

In *American Born Chinese*, Chin-kee singing "She Bangs" on a library table is the last straw for Danny (Yang 202-203) (see figure 3). Danny drags him away from the library and tries to beat him up, only to find that Chin-kee is actually the Monkey King in disguise. Chin-kee is amusing in the same way that William Hung had been, as they are both small Asian males singing about their desires for presumably White women, highlighted by their difference from Ricky

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<sup>24</sup> This is especially the case for pop music, which is a genre of popular music. This genre is often the most popular with urban teenagers and young adults, often gets more media attention than other popular music popular music genres, and its artists elevated to celebrity status. Pop is often the most mainstream popular music genre, compared to music styles such as hip hop or alternative rock.



Figure 3. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second Books, 2006). 203.

Martin, the original singer.<sup>25</sup> Unlike real life audiences of William Hung, no one at Danny's school is amused; one student claims that he was splattered with Chin-kee's spit, and another student tells the first to go to the doctor and be checked for S.A.R.S. However, Yang writes the amusement in from an implied audience. Below the full panel showing Chin-kee are the sound effects for laughter, which also appear in most of the panels about Chin-kee and Danny. The introduction of each narrative segment pertaining to Chin-kee is also accompanied by "clap clap clap clap," which together with comics version of canned laughter sets up Chin-kee's narrative as a sitcom.

Situation comedies are generally defined as comedy series structured into thirty-minute episodes, filmed with three cameras in front of a live audience (Dalton and Linder 2) and the problem or situation must be resolved by the end of the episode with largely static characters (68). This means that characters do not

<sup>25</sup> In addition, the lyrics "float like a flower / sting like a bee" are taken from Muhammad Ali's description of his own boxing technique. Chin-kee and William Hung not only contrasts with Ricky Martin but also with Muhammad Ali.

change over time, and characters are often stereotypes (42). Amanda Dyanne Lotz writes that sitcoms have been the first media programs to portray populations outside the norm, such as members of LGBTQ communities and ethnic minorities, perhaps because “laughter softens difficult issues” (139). While laughter may indeed soften difficult issues, it may also take the place of serious reflection. I have already mentioned scholarship arguing that many Asian American characters in mainstream media have been created as comical characters to restore mainstream audience confidence and trivialize the threat that Asian Americans are perceived to present. Laughing at characters on the fringes of the norm in sitcoms is to soften their perceived threat, and Chin-kee is a character to this effect. The student body of Oliphant High school largely do perceive Chin-kee as a real threat, especially Danny; however, the implied audience and the reader are meant to take Chin-kee as a joke and not particularly threatening to themselves.

*American Born Chinese* subverts many conventions of the sitcom even as it sets them up, such as the revelation of Chin-kee’s real identity, which is aligned with criticism arguing that the resolutions at the end of thirty-minute sitcom episodes, and indeed the structure of sitcoms, are artificial and avoid confronting complex issues (Hamamoto 136-148).<sup>26</sup> However, its use of canned laughter and an implied studio audience in a comic book format is the most interesting in terms of looking at stereotypes. The canned laughter builds through the fight between Danny and Chin-kee, with the text of “HA HA HA” getting larger and larger. When Danny’s final punch takes off Chin-kee’s head, however, the laughter is immediately cut short and never appears again (see figure 4). Essentially, at this point, the sitcom of Chin-kee ends, and Yang is asking the reader to set aside the mode of dealing with difficult issues by softening them through laughter and consider the resolution of *American Born Chinese* seriously. Also, the laughter in the Chin-kee narrative segments is used ironically. Yang posted an entry on his publisher’s blog website that sometimes he is taken aback that some readers find Chin-kee genuinely funny: “He’s meant to come off the page and slap you in the face. If you’re laughing at him, I want you to do so with a knot in your stomach and a dry throat” (“Gene Yang on Stereotypes”). Pulled along by canned laughter, the reader is made to perform the role of a laughing audience member, and is thus confronted with the guilt that all audience members laughing at sitcoms should feel.

Readers can recognize other levels of performance taking place after Chin-kee reveals his identity. The Monkey King has been acting as Chin-kee, and Jin has been acting as Danny. It is useful here to bring in Chen’s definitions of imposture versus impersonation. Imposture relies on a clear demarcation between the authentic and the fake, and attempts to hide the authentic seamlessly, but

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<sup>26</sup> Darrel Y. Hamamoto examines several ethnic-focused sitcoms and suggests that when not portraying stereotypes such as the rigid authoritarian Saito in *Gung Ho*, sitcoms generally downplay the complexity and seriousness of issues in ethnic integration by resorting to unconvincing displays of harmony among ethnic groups (146). The easy and depolitized incorporation in sitcoms is similar to Mannur’s argument regarding Asian fusion cooking.



Figure 4. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second Books, 2006). 212.

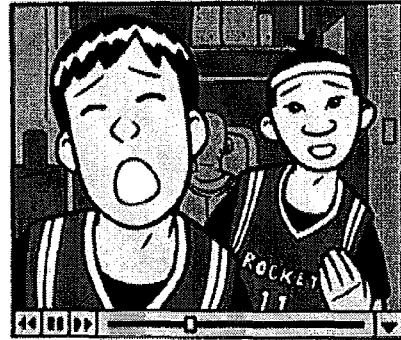


Figure 5. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second Books, 2006). unpaginated.

impersonation challenges both the authentic and the fake (7). Chen also writes that it is impersonation that liberates Asian Americans from always having to return to an “authentic” Asian American identity as a frame of reference. I argue that while the Monkey King is merely impersonating Chin-kee and performing Asian American stereotypes, Jin is being an imposter when he is trying to be Danny. The impersonation disrupts the imposter; it is the Monkey King’s performance that prevents Jin from being a seamless imposter.

As Jin comes to accept his Chinese heritage, his position vis-à-vis imposturing and impersonation shifts; the final panel of the comic shows Jin’s performance, but not as an imposter. This panel comes after the page bearing the text “The End” and Yang’s acknowledgements, and shows an image of Jin and Wei-chen in an online video (see figure 5). The image references “The Back Dorm Boys,” two college boys in Guanzhou, China, who gained immense popularity for a YouTube video of themselves lipsynching to the Backstreet Boys song “I Want It That Way.” In this video, the two boys parody boy bands by exaggerating elements of their performance, such as lovesick expressions and swaying to the music (The Back Dorm Boys). The reference to The Back Dorm Boys directly contrasts with the reference to William Hung. Yang seems to suggest that while William Hung is imposturing Ricky Martin, The Back Dorm Boys are impersonating the Backstreet Boys. The difference is that The Back Dorm Boys’ impersonation is satirical and involves a critique of the role they are



impersonating, whereas William Hung is uncritically trying to fit into the role of a pop star. Likewise, when Jin tries to become a White American by rejecting associations with Asianess and then becoming Danny, he is subscribing to the myth that White Americans are superior. However, the last panel shows that Jin has become more like The Back Dorm Boys by the end of the comic. Significantly, by evoking The Back Dorm Boys' performance, Yang avoids asserting that a "real" Asian or Asian American identity must be established through a complete repudiation of the American mainstream. Conversely, an engagement with the mainstream does not preclude an Asian or Asian American consciousness. Jin's performance as one of The Back Dorm Boys shows not only that he has reconciled himself with his Asian American identity, but also that he becomes aware that performance can call essentialized identities into question and allow him to adopt various roles.<sup>27</sup>

At the beginning of this chapter, I argued that the model minority discourse rules out Asian Americans as participants in popular culture. I believe that it also implies that as hard workers and quiet citizens, Asian Americans do not have a sense of humour; indeed, some responses to protests on the part of communities targeted by offensive humour is that they couldn't take jokes. Toyoshima's and Yang's comics prove the contrary; Asian Americans are able to participate in the same humorous valence as mainstream media, even turning its techniques against itself. Toyoshima and Yang assert that mainstream representation is important to Asian Americans, but rather than renounce stereotypical representations or construct "real" Asian Americas, they assert that as Americans they have a right to engage in humorous play as well.

### **Race-Neutral or Race-Conscious?**

Amanda Dyanne Lotz writes that sitcoms in the US have been the first television programs to feature ethnic minorities (139). However, the laughter of the studio audience being directed at the characters has led scholars to ask, "What is worse for the mediation of Blackness, nonpresence or symbolic annihilation?" (Coleman and McIlwain 127). Many *Secret Asian Man* strips also ask this question. For example, one strip shows Sam watching the television show *Final*

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<sup>27</sup> In the *Johnny Hiro* story "Let's Go to the Opera," performance is also a prominent trope. In this story, Hiro and Mayumi attend a performance of *The First Emperor* by an all-Asian cast at the Metropolitan Opera. Toshi Yamagoto, an old friend of Hiro's, also attends the opera, and is targeted for assassination by the former employees of TokyoFind.co.jp, a company which he forced out of business. The TokyoFind employees dress up as the samurai warriors of the Tokugawa-era Japanese warlord Asano Naganori, who also tried to avenge their leader. With Hiro and Mayumi's help, Toshi disguises himself with stage costumes to escape the opera house undetected. The narrator suggests that the opera singers are under pressure as they represent the abilities of Asians, and that the former TokyoFind employees are under pressure to avenge their employer. Significantly, both the opera singers and the TokyoFind employees are performing roles embedded in Asian history and tradition. Chao seems to be suggesting that contemporary Asians and Asian Americans can draw on Asian traditions, as well as American popular culture, to build their identities.

*Fu*, where martial artists fight against one another. Sam is divided; at first he thinks that he should be happy that Asians are making it on television, but then he thinks “although it’s kinda like being happy that gambling shows at casinos are giving Native American faces exposure” (31 July 2006, website 1).

In the last section, I drew on Chen’s ideas of impersonation to show that Chin-kee being performed by the Monkey King undercuts his stereotypical character. However, this does not mean that all performances of stereotypes can be undermined. As there is still a relative lack of Asian Americans managing mainstream production, for example in positions of director, casting staff, or producers, this may mean that Asians and Asian Americans often cannot choose to represent themselves in a way to subvert performances of stereotypes. One strip from 2004 shows Sam lining up with other ethnic minorities to pitch ideas to a television network. Two executives approve of one idea of an African American police officer and a White police officer forced to work together despite their differences, and approves of another idea of a single Latina mother working hard to overcome immigration red tape to become a famous singer. However, they reject Sam’s idea of “An Asian guy is courted by 10 hot blondes and made to choose one to become his bride,”<sup>28</sup> saying, “No one’s going to buy it,” and “we don’t believe in tokenism” (“sam\_tvcasting\_0204,” website 3). The executives’ objection based on realism is undercut by their comment on the single Latina mother pitch: “All the new legal Mexicans will eat that up!” Essentially, the network is represented as a culture industry and an arm of the ideological state apparatus, which is making profit a priority and supporting the status quo. Toyoshima’s criticism of mainstream media is also bolstered by having Sam pitch his ideas to the executives and being rejected; the implication is that *Secret Asian Man* is not a part of the culture industry.

*Secret Asian Man* suggests two different strategies for Asian American representations in the media. Because of the tendency of the media (and popular culture in general) to package difference as aberrance or exoticism, one is to encourage the rise of independent media to give Asian Americans a space to explore issues of ethnicity, and the other is to argue for “neutral” representations of Asian Americans in the mainstream media (a word I am using for the time being to refer to representations of Asian Americans without reference to their Asian identities). Sam is enthusiastic about independent media productions and programs that foreground the issue of ethnicity in the US, such as AZN Television and the Cartoon Network series *Minoriteam*. However, he is also apprehensive that some exclusive Asian programs may only be token efforts in response to mainstream exclusion. This is illustrated by a 2006 strip in which Toyoshima draws Sam being controlled by two smaller Sams inside his head and debating the significance of the Asian Excellence Awards (6 Feb. 2006, website 1) (see figure

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<sup>28</sup> Sam’s pitch is likely based on the American television reality show *The Bachelor*, in which eligible bachelors choose a winner from twenty-five romantic interests. By suggesting an Asian man as the focus of in Sam’s pitch, Toyoshima is also drawing attention to the fact that there has never been an Asian American bachelor in *The Bachelor*.

**SECRET ASIAN MAN By Tak**

secretasianman@rockydog.com • www.BlackLava.net/sam • ©2006 Tak Toyoshima



Figure 6. Tak Toyoshima, *Secret Asian Man*. 6 Feb. 2006. Web. 5 Oct. 2009. Website 1.

6). While one of the smaller Sams argues that the Awards is a show of love and support for talented Asian Americans, the other argues that the display is contrived and only shows how desperate Asian Americans are for recognition.

“Neutral” representation is the most obvious method for claiming America through the media. Asian Americans would be featured just like any other mainstream American via race-neutral casting. In a 2004 strip, Sam is watching *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* with a Sikh friend, who is apprehensive about the film’s premises. However, Sam says, “I think it’s exactly what we Asians need. We don’t need films about how special and exotic we are” (“Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle,” website 3).<sup>29</sup> This position, that Asian Americans should be represented without references to ethnic difference, is based on the perceived norm or the neutrality of the mainstream and runs parallel to theories regarding Whiteness. As Karyn McKinney writes, the description

<sup>29</sup> In some ways, the film portrays Harold and Kumar as neither special nor exotic, as trying to find a burger restaurant can represent participation in mainstream American food culture. However, the film also addresses stereotypes against Asian Americans. For example, Kumar reveals near the end that he purposefully spoiled his chance of getting into medical school earlier in the film because he does not want to become a stereotypical Asian American doctor, therefore revealing the impact that popular culture stereotypes have on his life choices. Toyoshima does not seem to be exploring the film’s handling of existing Asian American stereotypes, but his concern is that while Harold and Kumar are not stereotypical Asian American figures, their use of marijuana might generate stereotypes of Asian Americans as drug users. However, Toyoshima also leaves the truth of this stereotype open, as Sam goes on to use marijuana in the last panel.

“American” conjures up an image of a White person most of the time, and ethnic minorities are described as “African American” or “Asian” while whiteness goes unstated (4). Richard Dyer observes that “as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it” (9). Sam stating that he wants to see Asians represented like everyone else is a desire for Asians to fully inhabit “normality,” and within the US specifically, the American condition if not a broadly human condition.

In addition, Dyer writes that people who are White can speak for humanity or the individual whereas people of colour are usually perceived as speaking for their own ethnic group (2). Murray Smith, in his model of emotional engagement in cinema, defines “alignment” as the way the narrative enables the audience to identify with particular characters, whereas “allegiance” refers to the way the narrative generates sympathy for or against certain characters (qtd. in Oren 355). Oren concludes that most mainstream films that include Asian American characters still make the audience align themselves with the White characters even though they may generate sympathy and understanding for the Asian American characters (355). The urge to represent Asian Americans as the same as the mainstream is also a desire for Asian Americans to be perceived as being able to speak for all Americans, and for mainstream White Americans to finally align themselves with Asian Americans instead of simply understanding or sympathizing with them.

However, I argue that there is a dangerous conflation between participation in established norms and asserting oneself as the norm. Representing Asian Americans as being the same culturally as White Americans may place Asian Americans into the mainstream, but this does not challenge the norms of the mainstream; it does not “make whiteness strange” (Dyer 4). Disparaging programs such as the Asian Excellence Awards as contrived also perpetuates the mainstream programs as somehow more natural. *Johnny Hiro* offers a way of challenging the White mainstream while asserting ethnic minorities as the norm. Hiro interacts with a wide array of African American popular musicians. For example, while being chased by Hunts Point Fish Market staff in “Smack My Fish Up,” Hiro recalls a party he attended with Grand Puba, Akon, and Gwen Stefani,<sup>30</sup> and at the end of “The Comeback,” he accepts Grand Puba’s advice that since things are calming down after their court case, Hiro should try to restructure his life. Chao introduces Hiro’s interactions with pop stars casually, and shows that Hiro’s attitude towards these figures is casual as well. The effect is that these experiences seem to be aspects of Hiro’s everyday life, making it entirely natural for an Asian American busboy to be friends with the stars of rap and hip hop.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Grand Puba and Akon are both rap and hip hop musicians, and Gwen Stefani is a pop and rock musician. Akon and Gwen Stefani have been prominent in recent years and earned a variety of music industry awards such as the Grammy award and the MTV music video awards. These musicians have also worked collaboratively or have featured in one another’s music.

<sup>31</sup> Chao does not reveal the origins of their friendship, except to say that he has bumped into hip hop artists when living in New York (Croonenborghs).

Their friendship presents a normalization of Asian and African Americans without necessarily suggesting that they are conforming to the mainstream White “norm”; the reference to rap and hip hop gestures towards resistance and alliances among ethnic minorities, and hence remains political.

### **Mainstream Incorporation**

Another concern that the strip about the Asian Excellence Awards implies is that programs which are specific to Asian Americans may not be distributed widely, and hence cannot effect any changes in mainstream popular culture. The idea that *alternative* media is not fully *popular* culture, I argue, rests on a misconception regarding the relationship between the mainstream and subcultures and countercultures. Asian American alternative media could be seen as a subculture, which is not inherently oppositional to the mainstream. Ono and Pham note that “sometimes independent media are created without regard for the dominant, and sometimes independent media also reify and reproduce stereotypes of Asian Americans” (119-120). The relationship of independent media and the dominant media is more complex than one of opposition or complicity, because neither the dominant culture nor subcultures remain static. As I noted with regards to the repackaging of Asian food, the mainstream constantly reinvents itself by subsuming subcultures and countercultures. While this may have a negative impact, it also means that fears that Asian American independent media will always occupy a marginal position may not be justified.

In many ways, representations of music and of numerous popular musicians in *Johnny Hiro* also illustrate the relationship between mainstream and alternative, resistance and incorporation. In a bonus strip titled “Road Trip,” Hiro and Mayumi are driving and listening to the radio. Mayumi tunes in to “Hey Ya!” by OutKast, which she proclaims is America’s favourite song, and the rest of the strip shows her and Hiro singing this as they drive over a hill.<sup>32</sup> “Hey Ya!” was indeed very popular, staying number one on *Billboard’s* Hot 100 for nine weeks (Moss). Significantly, OutKast is an African-American hip hop duo, and their chart position and Mayumi’s qualification of their song reflects African Americans having “made it” in mainstream music. At the same time, rap and hip hop explicitly deal with the dissatisfaction of young African Americans with issues such as social discrimination. Chao uses the mainstream popularity of rap and hip hop to show that musical genres can occupy both a resistant position and a mainstream one. By extension, hip hop and rap appealing to Hiro and Mayumi (and Hiro being friends with hip hop and rap stars) also represents Asian American participation in both resistant and mainstream forms of popular culture.

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<sup>32</sup> Mayumi also tunes through radio stations playing “Diana” by Paul Anka, the Cuban song “Guantanamera” as sung by Wyclife Jean, and “Take Me Home, Country Roads” by John Denver. These songs are either canonical American rock songs or recent chart toppers. Other than addressing the issue of alternative versus mainstream media, this comic strip asserts that at least Asian Americans are consumers of popular music and enjoy it. Hiro is an Asian American who does not play piano or violin but enjoys hip hop.

Arguably, the mainstream success of hip hop and Asian foods may be construed as a failure rather than a success. Nguyen writes that racial formation in the United States is defined by the process of hegemony, where dominant groups establish consensus with subordinate groups even if their interests do not always coincide (*Race and Resistance* 11). Giving the cultural products of ethnic minorities space within the mainstream can represent tokenism and a hegemonic move on the part of corporations and agencies to manage dissent rather than success in “claiming America.” However, like the culture industry thesis, this view is pessimistic and denies the political function of much cultural production, as it fails to acknowledge that the mainstream can be changed by incorporating the products of alternative cultures.

John Fiske argues that the way that alternative cultures change the mainstream is often progressive rather than radical (161). He also cites Michel De Certeau’s analogy of a well organized army versus guerrilla fighters to describe the relationship of the mainstream and subcultures (19). Toyoshima offers an Asian American version of this analogy in an early 2010 strip where Sam makes a new year’s resolution to change stereotypical representations of Asian Americans in Hollywood. When his family asks him about his plans, he elaborates that he will try to sneak Asian Americans into the cast, and then dresses up as a ninja to demonstrate “a proud tradition of being sneaky,” telling his family that “They’ll never see it coming” (3 Jan. 2010, website 2). Dressing up as a ninja seems hypocritical of Sam, as his goal is to rectify stereotypes. However, in addition to the humour at this discrepancy, Toyoshima is also seriously considering that it may be necessary to make incremental changes and perform stereotypes in order to access mainstream media at all. In addition to Sam performing as a ninja, Toyoshima is also performing as Sam to broadcast his social concerns to the mainstream. As Fiske writes, “Despite nearly two centuries of capitalism, subordinated subcultures exist and intransigently refuse finally to be incorporated” (19). While incorporation and commodification occur, Fiske’s point is that while one subculture may be incorporated, the larger category and the concept of a subculture have not been incorporated. Thus, subcultures are always becoming a part of the mainstream but always reinventing themselves to maintain autonomy. This is the kind of “double agency” at the core of Tina Chen’s argument. Through this logic, subcultural ninja tactics and self-aware performance allow Asian Americans to claim mainstream popular culture and change its norms without necessarily compromising an Asian American identity.

## Chapter 2

This chapter will look at Asian American comics and how they engage with different forms of comics in America. Scholars such as Hillary Chute have recently emphasized that comics are “democratic” in that they are removed from esoteric “high” literature, and hence have great potential for placing the experiences of minorities into the popular imagination (“Ragtime” 281). Furthermore, scholars have argued that the blend of word and image into a hybrid medium is fitting for conveying experiences particular to minorities, who often occupy disparate social spaces and adopt hybrid identities.

While using comics for storytelling exists in many different parts of the world, there are dominant types of comics in North America with their own affordances and popular culture significances. For example, the *Handbook of American Popular Culture* describes comic strips as a uniquely American art form which is widely read, accessible, and reflects the lives of its readers (“Comic Strips” 205-206). Involvement with comics as a major American literary form follows upon earlier Asian American literary projects in claiming America. For example, David Leiwei Li examines Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* as a novel in the tradition of the American romance. As Mukherjee’s character Jasmine changes from Indian village girl to a cosmopolitan American, Mukherjee is claiming America in parallel by establishing herself as an American writer (93). However, Li notes that the novel *Jasmine* embraces America and Americanism at the expense of the “conditions of actuality” (96) and by abandoning Asian American social consciousness (94). As I will show, Asian American comics may be as much rooted in fantasy as the romance genre is, but this does not prevent the comics from engaging with political questions of ethnicity *and* claiming America through involvement with a popular genre.

### Racial Representation

I would again like to note Viet Thanh Nguyen’s point that comics can address the visual dimensions of race. However, this does not mean that visual representation unproblematically serves the interests of Asian Americans. One of Charles Hatfield’s frameworks for comics is to view comics as “cartooning” (“How to” 133). While he does not offer a clear definition of cartooning, he goes on to paraphrase Art Spiegelman, who has stated that comics are “as much diagrammatic as [they are] illustrative. What are represented here are *ideas* of things, rather than specific thing: each object in its quiddity (what-ness), not its particularity (this-ness)” (134). Monica Chiu concurs with this argument and uses Will Eisner’s comic book drawings as an example:

readers depend on accepted, visual convention in order to understand what they see...For example, Eisner depicts the visual type of a “hero” graphically as such: a robust, energetic fellow with a square jaw, an expansive chest jutting over thin but muscular legs, a character more often than not male, blonde, blue-eyed, and Anglo...Immediately distinguished from the hero is an easily identifiable “evil” antagonist, whom Eisner

depicts as an aging, thin, hunched man, his back bent like a vulture's, claw-like hands extending from arms bent at the elbows. (102-103)

While reading comics as cartoons is a valid approach, approaching Asian American comics as cartooning may be problematic. Asian American studies have consistently pointed to the problem of mainstream readers taking one writer's vision as representative of Asian Americans as a whole. If this occurs for novels, which tend to focus on specific characters and their psychological processes, it would be expected that this is also a danger for comics, which often feature cartoony and iconic images. In one humorous strip from *Secret Asian Man* named "Racial Drawing 101: The Crash Course" (Toyoshima, 12 June 2006, website 1), Toyoshima shows the danger of cartoon stereotypes by presenting and then undercutting racial stereotypes (see figure 7). The captions in the strip stating that the White face is the "default face" and "hair and skin colour are key!" are ironic. The last panel could be read in two ways, either as a criticism on the lukewarm reception of comics dealing with ethnicity, or as suggesting the inevitable lack of success for comics which represent characters who are too racially stereotyped.

### SECRET ASIAN MAN By Tak

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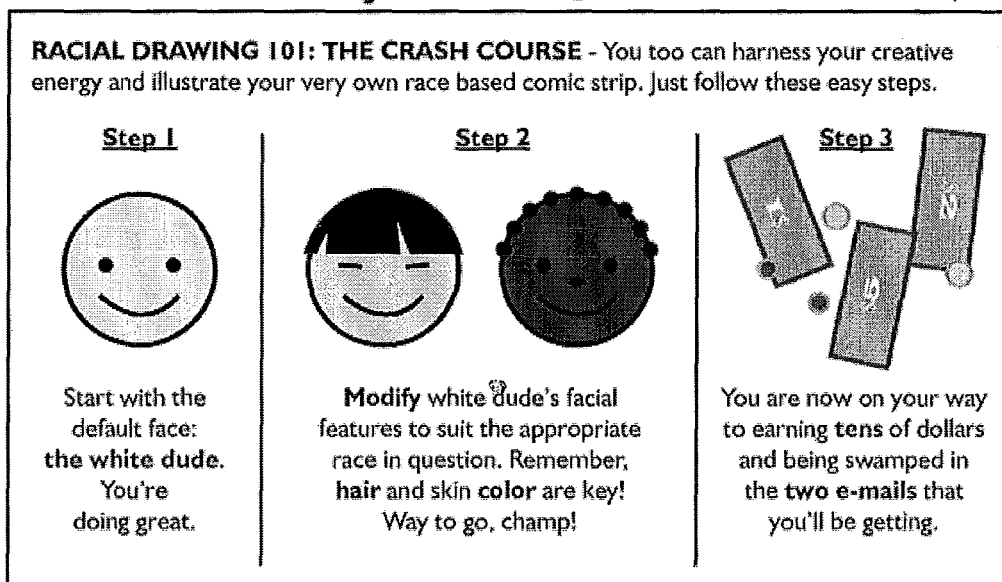


Figure 7. Tak Toyoshima, *Secret Asian Man*. 12 June 2006. Web. 5 Oct. 2009. Website 1.

Asian American comics creators have implemented representational strategies to meet these problems. Sandra Oh writes that most of Adrian Tomine's work tries to depict the "universal" instead of particular, and hence his Asian characters do not feature specific eye shapes, "the privileged sign of Asian racial identity" (132). In addition, Tomine's drawings of himself as a character often



sport reflective glasses that obscures his eyes entirely, which according to Oh “eschew[s] the ‘marked,’ hyper-visible position of the racialized and objectified Other in favour of the position of empowered viewer” (138-139). In comparison with Tomine’s realistic drawings, *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro* and *Secret Asian Man* especially are comics which feature simple artwork. *American Born Chinese*, arguably, is the text among the three comics which makes the clearest differentiation among races. Asian American characters have a slightly yellower skin tone and generally more slanted eyes.<sup>33</sup> However, Chin-kee is a consciously stereotyped character, and hence features bloated and slanted eyes and bright yellow skin. In *Johnny Hiro* and *Secret Asian Man* in particular, there is often no difference in facial features between characters of different races. Some Asian Americans in *Johnny Hiro* have slanted lines for eyes, but this is not a trait applied to all Asian Americans. For example, the Asian Americans working at the Hunts Point Fish Market feature diverse facial features. In “Smack My Fish Up,” Akon, Hiro, and Gwen Stefani differ only in their hair colour, and these characters all feature small circles for eyes.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, *Secret Asian Man* features circle eyes on characters of all races, but since it is a full-colour comic, different skin colours are differentiated. “Racial Drawing 101,” like *American Born Chinese*, employs racial stereotypes which set off the lack of these stereotypes in the rest of the comic.

These three different titles employ different visualization strategies with regards to race. *American Born Chinese* establishes Asian racial difference from Whites, but the difference is small when compared with the lurid figure of Chin-kee. On the other hand, *Johnny Hiro* and *Secret Asian Man* employ abstraction to the point of circle eyes, yet grant characters certain individual markers, a strategy which at once elides markers of racial difference and highlights individual characteristics. Towards the end of this chapter I will return specifically to look at how *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro* and *Secret Asian Man* present and problematize types found in superhero comics.

### **Imagetext in Asian American Comics**

Comics, as a form that presents both words and images, are especially suited to Asian American narratives, especially on the level of Asian languages. As Charles Hatfield writes, there are many ways of framing what comics are, and one of these frameworks is viewing comics as “imagetext” (“How to” 139), which also lends comics its singularity, as no other medium juxtaposes image and text in the same manner. What *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro*, and *Secret Asian Man* show is that Asian language characters could be effectively integrated into

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<sup>33</sup> Due to the story taking place mostly in the suburbs and emphasizing Jin’s isolation, there are few Asian American characters and no characters from other discernable ethnic minorities.

<sup>34</sup> There is still the problem within *Johnny Hiro* where the whiteness of the printing paper is the default for all races. Perhaps this is a production consideration; the comics are generally black and white with graytones to mark shadows.

the comics as both word and image, creating a hybrid element to tell stories of hybridity.<sup>35</sup>

Asian American comics employ various strategies for integrating Asian languages into the visual format of the comic. Of the three texts that I am examining, *American Born Chinese* is the only one which uses Asian language characters within speech bubbles, although other Asian American comics such as Derek Kirk Kim's *Same Difference and Other Stories* also uses Korean, with a footnote translation (60). Adrian Tomine's *Shortcomings* also uses Korean and Japanese in the speech bubbles (26-27, 96-97) but does not offer translations, rather relying on the images to convey the rough content of the text.<sup>36</sup> In *Johnny Hiro*, Asian languages are not represented in their original characters, and it seems that all of the characters speak English, even the robot pilots in 1978 Tokyo. Otherwise, Chao uses Japanese in the title pages for each issue. *Secret Asian Man* occasionally uses small placards at the end of comic strips with the *hiragana* for "to be continued" or "the end" written (Toyoshima, "Morgan Hill Haru Matsuri 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemorative Strip." 25 Apr. 2010, website 2) (see figure 8). In addition to writing spoken words in Chinese, *American Born Chinese* also features a red seal at the top of each page (see figure 9). The ancient Chinese characters in these seals are the names of the main character of each segment, and when Danny changes back to Jin, the seal changes as well (Yang, 214).

In addition, Asian American comics creators are developing a variety of ways to convey that the words written in their texts are not being spoken in English, even if the text is written in English. Yang and Toyoshima both use angle brackets with footnotes informing readers that the language is spoken in Mandarin Chinese (Yang 23) or Japanese (Toyoshima, "Tourist Trap," website 3). *Johnny Hiro* includes many Japanese names for seafood but written in *romaji*, some of which are explained in the footnotes by the character of Alton Brown. Mr. Masago's name is not explained, nor is the *aji* that Hiro is sent to buy in "Smack My Fish Up." It is clear that there are many different ways of using Asian languages, each offering different levels of understanding. In these comics, the onus is on the reader to bring cultural knowledge of Asia and Asian America to bear upon the text. The fact that there are Asian American comics published bearing passages of Asian languages shows that perhaps this expectation is justified. One *Secret Asian Man* comic strip criticizes the tendency for White Americans to exoticize Han characters, which results in tattoos displaying

<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that text-only media cannot give a similar reading experience. Many pieces of Asian American poetry and prose also use Asian languages to challenge the normative use of English.

<sup>36</sup> One segment in *Shortcomings* narrates how Ben Tanaka, a focus character of the comic, tries to help his friend Alice Kim by pretending to be her boyfriend, so that her sexual orientation does not alarm her parents. Earlier, Alice tells Ben that her Korean family dislikes Japanese people for atrocities committed in WWII; subsequently Alice and her parents have an argument, which Tomine represents with Korean characters (27). Readers who do not read Korean can understand that an argument is taking place due to the characters' gestures and expressions, but their inability to understand the specific words aligns them with Ben, who does not understand Korean either.



Figure 8. Tak Toyoshima, “Morgan Hill Haru Matsuri 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemorative Strip.” *Secret Asian Man*. 25 April 2010. Web. 14 May 2010. Note the placard at the bottom right hand corner, which reads *owari*, the Japanese term for “end.”

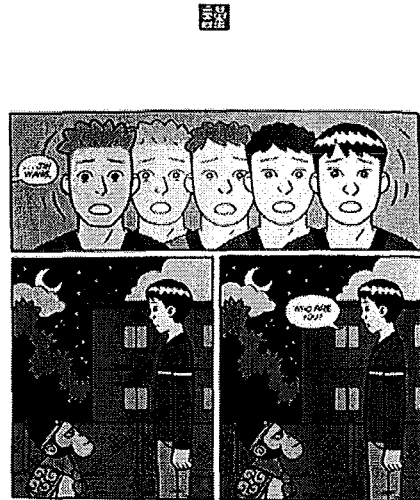


Figure 9. Gene Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second, 2006). 214.

nonsensical phrases (“Tattoo You!” website 3), but this at least means that there is enough interest in Asian languages that readers of Asian American comics may dig deeper to find out what the words in the comics mean. The recent popularity of Japanese *manga* in North America may also enable Asian American comic book creators to use Asian languages in their works without alienating readers, and to encourage Asian American comic book creators to use its techniques in their own work. For example, Toyoshima said in an interview that he grew up reading both American and Japanese comics, and looks to both types of comics for influence (Mori).<sup>37</sup>

As I touched on when discussing *Shortcomings*, it is possible to discern meanings from the images in a comic without a translation. For example, the sequences in *American Born Chinese* which feature the Monkey King show him calling out attacks with Chinese characters, while the effects of these attacks are

<sup>37</sup> However, it is important not to automatically associate all Asian American comics with Asian comics. In the interview with Fred Chao, Bart Crooneborghs noted that the art in *Johnny Hiro* looks like a “weird crossbred of European and Japanese styles,” and asks Chao what his artistic influences are. Chao goes on to list several comic book creators, none of whom are Japanese.

illustrated in the panel (Yang 18) (see figure 10). Groensteen, a French comics theorist, writes that the speech bubble can be seen as a panel within a panel, which has been established by convention to contain images representing language (67-68). To extend this argument, it is then possible in comics to reverse the placement of image and text, or to create comics that play with the usual demarcation between image and text. Hatfield closely examines the interplay of image and text in “How to Kill a...,” the first entry in *Love and Rockets*.<sup>38</sup> On page 3 of the comic, the phrase “How to kill a” occurs in each panel in different forms to menace Isabel Ruebens (see figure 11), thereby contributing to the sense of her oppressive writer’s block (Hatfield, “How to” 137-138).

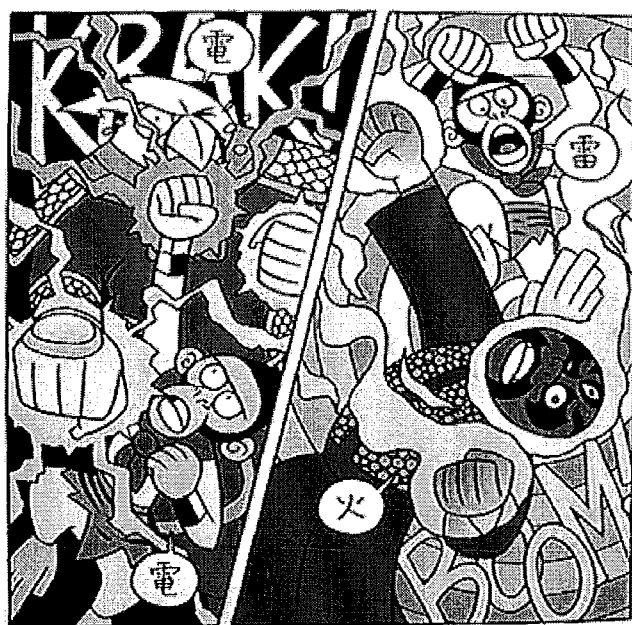


Figure 10. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second Books, 2006).



Figure 11. Jaime Hernandez, “How to Kill a” *Music for Mechanics* (Fantagraphics, 1985). 15.

Although the Asian American comics I am examining rarely use the abstraction characteristic of “How to Kill a...,” the Monkey King’s Chinese characters in *American Born Chinese* are involved in a similar play between

<sup>38</sup> *Love and Rockets*, by Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez, began publication in 1981, and includes several long serials as well as short stories and comic strips. It is acclaimed for its sensitive and innovative handling of Latino and Chicano characters, and considered a pioneering work in alternative comix.

image and text. In his book on *manga*, Schodt writes that the earliest Chinese characters can be seen as a form of cartooning, and this puts Japanese *manga* in a unique position of being able to integrate images and text (25). For example, Osamu Tezuka considers the pictures he draws in his *manga* as a “unique type of symbol” (Schodt 25). In *American Born Chinese*, readers who do not read Chinese would understand the characters as speech because they are encased in speech bubbles, but not knowing the language would enable readers to process the characters as magical symbols related to the Monkey King’s powers or as images in their own right; it is also possible, as someone who reads Chinese characters, to step back and examine the characters as images within images. Saussure’s argument that the relationship between signifier and signified is largely arbitrary applies here. The use of Chinese characters in *American Born Chinese* are engaging on both the semiotic and the aesthetic/decorative level, thereby freeing language from its essential function as a sign. I have mentioned in my discussion of racial representation that Asian Americans are often essentialized when in reality the community is extremely diverse, and I argue that opening up language to multiple levels of engagement in Asian American comics is a resignification paralleling opening the term “Asian American” to reflect greater diversity.

Also, the panels on page 18 show a *mise en abyme* where the character/image duality is echoed in the stylized English sound effects within the larger panel. Word art and sound effects, like concrete poetry, also disrupt the binary of word and image.<sup>39</sup> It may seem that the information within these panels is redundant, since the image of the Monkey King using lightning on his enemies should be self-evident without needing sound effects and Chinese characters for emphasis. However, what these panels present is a rich interplay that collapses the difference between image and text, which is significant for the plot. At this point, the deities of heaven refuse to admit the Monkey King into their feast because he is a monkey, and his attack is an attempt to cross boundaries and level differences, which the comic repeats at a formal level.

I have written that *Johnny Hiro* does not feature characters speaking in other languages, but this does not mean that it does not contain the interplay of text and image. In the next chapter, I will show that the billboards in 1978 Tokyo display Japan as a postmodern consumer society, but they also function as images within the larger image. In addition, the Japanese text creates a different spatial effect and reading flow. Chiu, in her consideration of *Persepolis* and *Citizen 13660*, writes that their creators use the space of the page to articulate conflicts between the individual and the nation. In particular, *Citizen 13660* recreates the spatial confinement of the Japanese internment on the comic book page (110), demonstrating the ability of graphic storytelling to relate such an experience. *Johnny Hiro* is a comic which greatly emphasizes the public spaces of New York,

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<sup>39</sup> *Re-Gifters* uses sound effects to interesting ends as well. While the majority of sound effects in the comic are in English, the last round of Dixie’s hapkido tournament features sound effects in Korean.

and it also plays with space in relation to language. While English is written left to right and downwards (a convention that most Simplified Chinese and Korean texts now follow), Japanese is still written top to bottom and right to left. For example, the titles in *Johnny Hiro* are written on the page opposite the splash pages of each issue, with the words on the right side of the page. As I stated earlier, readers who do not read Asian languages may simply read such text as images, especially in the case of *Johnny Hiro*, where the Japanese chapter titles are hand-written and not in a Japanese font. As such, the text could be read as one whole image. However, readers would still process the words as text of a known language and would read it as Japanese is read, from the top of the page downwards. Not only does this contribute to further interplay between image and text, it also makes the reader temporarily forego the conventions of English language. Nubla writes that using creole languages in *Dogeaters* and *Rolling the R's* “deploys third spaces” that represent the social and physical realities of their characters (201) in a way that English, as a privileged language, does not. Through this logic, *Johnny Hiro* uses Japanese language to effect a literal creolization of space on the pages of comics and to direct readers to use a hybrid system of reading. As the very first pages of each new section, this type of heading signals the other conventions that may be subverted, such as stereotypes of Asian Americans or of superheroes. It is important to note that this does not alienate readers, as apart from the “Bonus Materials,” the title of the story is always given in English after a couple of pages.

### **Taking On American Mainstream Comics**

As I discussed in the introduction, there are many different types of comics. A useful term used by Charles Hatfield is the “package” of a comic, which includes its format, publication, and methods of distribution (*Alternate* 4). In the US, serialized and fully-coloured comics were dominated by stories of superheroes, action, or suspense, whereas black and white graphic novels have been associated with underground comix, which were created outside of the comics Code Authority and read by older audiences. These differences have made each graphic literature package unique, with specific conventions and “cultural baggage” (Chute, “Comics as Literature?” 453). Each text I am studying is a different form of comic, and this section will examine how they interact with American comics of a similar format and their conventions.

Comics studies form a new field of scholarship, and terminology is still constantly being debated. Aside from the terminology of comics techniques and effects (such as Scott McCloud’s use of the term “closure” to refer to the cognitive act of linking two separate images into a narrative sequence), the terminology regarding the texts as a whole is being constantly redefined. Comics from other countries are sometimes labelled with non-English words, for example *manga* for Japanese comics and *bandes dessinées* for French and Belgian comics. Some comics scholars have used “comics” and “graphic novels” interchangeably while others separate the two terms, and there is the alternate spelling of “comix”

to refer specifically to the underground work published in the 1960s and 1970s in America (Hatfield, *Alternative* ix). Hillary Chute gives a very detailed analysis regarding different forms of comics: she calls all comics “comics” and opts for the term “graphic narrative” instead of “graphic novel” for book-length works, because not all narratives are structured like novels, and the term “novel” implies that all comics are fiction (“Comics as Literature?” 453). In Chute’s article, “comic books” refers to serialized colour comics, “cartoons” refers to single-panel images, and “comic strips” refers specifically to newspaper strips that arose in the US (453-454). To take Chute’s analysis further, I have been using the term “graphic literature,” as “narrative” rules out the possibility of non-narrative poetry that also use images. In addition, I feel that calling only book-length comics “graphic narrative” is misleading, as comic strips still offer narratives, only shorter. Given these parameters, I will be examining *Johnny Hiro* as a serialized comic book (which Chao calls the “floppy”), and I am retaining the term “graphic novel” for *American Born Chinese* as it is a book-length work of fiction. However, as the stories in *Johnny Hiro* mostly stand alone, I will refer to them as “issues” rather than “chapters,” even though I am working from a collected volume. In addition, Chute only discusses the formats for comics published on paper, and hence does not discuss comics online. Although I will be principally concerned with *Secret Asian Man* as a syndicated comic strip, I will also be discussing its significance as an Asian American webcomic.

#### *Secret Asian Man* as the Comic Strip and Webcomic

*Secret Asian Man* began in 1998 as a weekly comic in the *Boston Weekly Dig*, a newspaper based in Boston Chinatown, and subsequently featured in Asian-American Village Online. United Feature Syndicate, whose other notable comic strips include *Dilbert* and *Peanuts*, took on the series in July 2007, but dropped it in September 2009. Currently, *Secret Asian Man* is running weekly in the Honolulu *Star Bulletin*. Structurally, *Secret Asian Man* is a conventional comic strip in that it features short, isolated incidents in the lives of a recurring cast, and is the first Asian American comic to be syndicated and featured in national newspapers. While comics in general have developed throughout the world, the comic strip is seen as distinctly American (Berger, *Comic-Stripped American* 6); Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester write that although comics originated in Europe, the US claimed the comic strips as a distinct cultural space after WWI (xii). As such, *Secret Asian Man* breaks into one form of American popular culture. As comic strips were first published in newspapers, they were not fantastic stories like ones featured in serialized comics, but were rather “integrated into the ribbon of war and sports and society” (Gopnik, qtd in Heer and Worcester). Berger further argues that comic strips, as mass culture, reflect society and help individuals to understand their society. Within this framework, comics such as *Dilbert* negotiate what it means to be an office worker at the end of the twentieth century. I argue that *Secret Asian Man* takes on a similar role as

other comic strips by reflecting and providing commentary on changes in American society.

Comic strips represent both the mainstream and emerging subcultural and countercultural forces. On the one hand, they are a form of mass culture and hence are a part of the mainstream, but on the other hand the roots of comic strips seem to be faintly revolutionary. Heer and Worcester write that comic strips started to incorporate more middle-class characters and became more widely read in the 1920s (xi), implying that they represented or developed along with a popular culture minority, which asserted itself against the dominant, but slipping, high culture of the time. That most comic strips today feature middle class (White) North Americans testifies to the success of comic strips in asserting the presence of the American middle class. Similar to the beginnings of the comic strip, which reflected a middle-class consciousness rising against high culture, *Secret Asian Man* currently asserts an ethnic minority against the mainstream White culture. Hence, *Secret Asian Man* represents Asian American presence in mass media (the mainstream) as well as changes to the mainstream. Certain strips consciously reflect upon the balance between these two functions. Two comic strips from 2003 deal with Toyoshima negotiating with mainstream editors, who wanted to change the title to just “SAM” so as not to alienate non-Asian Americans, and wanted Toyoshima to “focus on more than just Asian issues and broaden [his] topics” (3 July 2003, website 3). At the time *Secret Asian Man* was running in *The Weekly Dig*, and Toyoshima recognizes that “the obvious drawback here is that it is a compromise of subject matter in exchange for a wider audience.” Ultimately, Toyoshima decided to continue *Secret Asian Man* as before. Under United Features syndication, *Secret Asian Man* maintained its original title, but incorporated a more diverse recurring cast, such as Charlie, an African American inventor and Sam’s old friend, and Marie, Sam’s Italian-Irish-Native American wife.

As a webcomic, *Secret Asian Man* needs to be discussed in the context of scholarship regarding ethnicity and the Internet. The Internet has been promoted as a perfectly democratic space where it is possible to shake concerns and prejudices related to bodily existence, such as those regarding race and ethnicity. Rubin and Melnick note, however, that many of the zines (personal online periodical publications, much like blogs) run by Asian American women do not circumvent issues relating to racial bodies, but rather discuss them openly, some directly addressing negative stereotypes against Asian women in online pornography (243-244). *Secret Asian Man* can be seen as following the tradition of zines by interrogating issues of race on the Internet. One early comic strip challenges the idea that race does not matter online: Sam is playing *Dungeons and Dragons*, where he feels a sense of belonging and the ability to be a hero. However, other players see the Asian appearance of Sam’s character and tell him that he should be in “Oriental Adventures” and ask if there is a “chink” in his armour (Toyoshima, “The Complete Origins of Secret Asian Man,” website 3).



However, the idea of a “free” Internet is legitimate. Rubin and Melnick write that many Asian American zines started because their creators could not find print publications to suit their cultural needs (228), and *Secret Asian Man* is able to reach many readers through internet publication in addition to its initial serialization in *the Weekly Dig*. After United Features Syndicate dropped *Secret Asian Man*, Toyoshima wrote on the comic website that although he was disappointed, he felt that he could again take the comic in his own preferred directions rather than defer to an editor (31 Aug. 2009, website 1).<sup>40</sup> Rubin and Melnick observe that zines were first started and dominated by Asian Americans (218), and that their online publications helped usher in similar forms of alternative individual publishing (246). As a webcomic, *Secret Asian Man* occupies an emerging and alternative popular culture space, and as a syndicated comic, it occupies a more mainstream popular culture space. However, as the boundaries between the mainstream and alternative cultures are permeable, *Secret Asian Man* does not occupy wholly disparate spaces; after all, it is the online success of *Secret Asian Man* that led it to be syndicated. The comic’s changes during syndication reflect the demands to fit the mainstream to a certain extent, yet it is important to note that by broadening his audience, Toyoshima did not necessarily weaken his political message for ethnic minorities, and hence remained alternative and mainstream at the same time.

#### *Johnny Hiro* as the Serialized Superhero Comic

*Johnny Hiro* was drawn in separate issues starting from 2007, with issues 1 to 3 released individually and then added to issues 4 and 5 in a trade paperback. In terms of the format of its individual issues and its form of distribution, *Johnny Hiro* is very similar to serialized comic books in the US, which are released in issues of roughly 30 pages, and collected into volumes. This allows Chao to engage with the superhero fiction genre, which is the most predominant genre published in this format (I will discuss superheroes in the next section), and also allows the collection to reference ongoing popular culture events. While many graphic novels are published serially and then integrated into one volume, graphic novels and serialized comics still differ in production and plotting. Serialized titles from publishers such as Marvel and DC are usually controlled by the publisher, which assigns production roles such as writing, pencilling, or lettering to its employees, whereas graphic novels, influenced by underground comix, tend to be produced by individuals or self-elected teams. Production-wise, *Johnny Hiro* is close to a graphic novel, as Fred Chao wrote and drew the comic while his partner, Dylan Bab, worked on graytones (Jaffe), and the publisher, AdHouse books, is a small alternative press. However, graphic novels usually present one overarching story whereas serialized comics tend to include a small story per

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<sup>40</sup> The *secretasianman.com* website crashed in fall 2009, and Toyoshima succeeded in fixing it and redesigning the site as of summer 2010. However, many of the blog archives previously on the site are no longer posted.

issue, and *Johnny Hiro* is a volume of largely self-contained short stories. Chao believes that many serialized comics do not try to exploit the potential of the 32-page story, and instead create long stories that end up being inaccessible to new readers (Jaffe). Each *Johnny Hiro* issue offers a short glimpse into Hiro's daily life without specifying dates, implying that there are many such incidents left unexplored and leaving room for reinvention; Chao states in the interview that he has thought of enough stories *Johnny Hiro* to fill seventy-nine issues, and is aiming for a more realistic thirty to thirty-five issues (Jaffe).

Danny Fingeroth notes two aspects of superheroes - that superheroes generally do not permanently die in comics (18), and superheroes are constantly reinvented to suit the times (19-20). I argue that the format of serialized short stories lends itself particularly well to timelessness and constant reinvention.<sup>41</sup> Although the stories in *Johnny Hiro* do not specify dates, there are many dated references. Much like the comic strip format in *Secret Asian Man*, the short serial format allows Chao to explore ongoing real world events through each new *Johnny Hiro* story. The best example from the collected volume is Mayumi's continuing citations of *New York Times* articles. After "Gozadilla" destroys Hiro and Mayumi's apartment, Mayumi telephones Mayor Michael Bloomberg and tells Hiro that she read an article saying that Bloomberg's number is listed and many people call him to complain about problems in New York ("Big Lizard in my Backyard"). Two issues later, Mayumi urges Hiro to go to the Metropolitan Opera House after she reads an article about discount tickets. Chao gives in-panel notes with full citations for these articles; the first is dated July 13, 2005, and the second is dated October 9, 2006. This integration of *New York Times* articles exemplifies the paradox of timelessness and the potential for reinvention. From the dates of these two articles, it is possible to judge that time has passed; however, "Let's Go to the Opera" does not "follow" "Big Lizard in my Backyard" as each tells a different story. It would be more apt to say that Hiro and his stories are reinvented for each new issue. If superheroes can be reinvented to reflect ongoing changes in society, then Chao has created, in part due to his choice of publishing format, an Asian American hero who has potential for the same sort of popular cultural immortality. This is significant for the role of Asian American comics in claiming America. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Kingston's initial use of the term was in reference to her novel *China Men*, which seeks to claim a place for Asians in American history. In contrast, the publication format

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<sup>41</sup> However, writing comics for the 32-paged format and keeping stories accessible may also force the story to be simple and resolve itself quickly. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Mayor Bloomberg's intervention in "The Comeback" does not reflect the political access of most Asian Americans in Hiro and Mayumi's position. Likewise, other stories in *Johnny Hiro* sometimes exhibit *deus ex machina* endings, such as Gozadilla falling asleep. Jeffrey Steingarten almost choking to death at Masago's House of Fish and deciding to leave also leaves the anxiety regarding his restaurant review unfulfilled, which "Lobster Run" seems to set up as the main concern in the issue.

and structure of *Johnny Hiro* essentially looks forward and claims American futures for Asian American participation.<sup>42</sup>

#### *American Born Chinese* as the Graphic Novel

*American Born Chinese* differs from *Secret Asian Man* and *Johnny Hiro* most obviously in that it was not formally serialized, although Yang does write on his publisher's website that he posted sections online as he worked ("Gene Yang on Stereotypes"). Of the three titles, it best fits the definition of a graphic novel in its focus and longer story arc. As a graphic novel, it is the best text to discuss the recent surge in the interest in the graphic novel in North America and its socio-historical dimensions. As I mentioned in the Introduction and the analysis of *Johnny Hiro*, until recently most comics in North America were serialized comics produced by a company-managed team, which focussed mostly on superhero or action stories and were targeted towards young males. The significance of underground comix is that they provided an alternate packaging and audience for comics, as comix told intimate and personal stories and were not created for children (Hatfield, *Alternative Comics* 7). According to Hatfield, underground comix originated due to a combination of social pressures and changes in the publishing industry, such as the imposition of the Comics Code Authority and the countercultural tendencies among artists and writers in the 1960s (11). Hatfield provides a nuanced perspective on alternative comics' social position, which can be both "American kitsch" and "alternative approaches to comic art" (19, emphasis added), telling narratives both personal and political (such as the feminist work of Julie Doucet). This makes the graphic novel an apt medium for the story of *American Born Chinese*. Although the story is fiction, it seems like an intimate (albeit unconventional) biography of Jin Wang. However, this "biography" is also political, as Jin is a member of the Asian American minority and his story reflects the discrimination and difficulties Asian American children face growing up in America. In addition, *American Born Chinese* occupies both a popular culture position and a "literary" position in its distribution and access. It won the Michael Printz Award in 2007, which denotes excellence in literature for children and young adults. However, while graphic novels in the form of comix have had limited audiences, the recent surge in the interest in comics has pushed many alternative comics forward, and the general reading public seems less concerned with the differences among different types of comics than with the fact that they are all "comics." For example, many libraries and bookstores shelve all comics together rather than separating them according to fiction genre or nonfiction subject. Among them, *American Born Chinese* is presented as a popular "comic" in a general sense.

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<sup>42</sup> A *Secret Asian Man* strip criticizes the lack of Asian characters in Hollywood science fiction films despite the number of Asian working in science and technology, ironically asking, "Are Asians extinct in the future?" (Toyoshima, "To the Stars!" website 3). This is changing, as recent science fiction productions such as *Sunshine* and *Battlestar Galactica* include Asian characters.

The changing social position of comics also reflects the interplay between mainstream popular culture and subcultures and countercultures, which I focused on in Chapter 1. As underground comix were created independently of major comics publishers and flouted their regulations, it is possible to see comix as a counterculture. However, with the recent popularity (and commodification) of comics in general, arguably it is difficult for comix to continue to be “underground” or as radically different as they were in the 1960s and 1970s. These concerns parallel the concerns of Asian Americans in independent media, who believe that the mainstream necessarily lessens the political nature of their work. As in the repackaging of Asian foods on television culinary shows, the concern is valid. It seems that like adopting a multicultural or cosmopolitan stance, comics are increasingly seen as fashionable, and it is possible that Asian American concerns are decontextualized when consumed along with other comics. However, as I argued in Chapter 1, alternative cultures are constantly reinventing themselves as they are incorporated. In this section, I explored the ways in which *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro* and *Secret Asian Man* engage with various social spaces through comics, from the long-established superhero comic to new spaces online. In comics as well as other media, Asian Americans both occupy the mainstream and push against the peripheries.

### Superheroes

Even though there has been an increase in the number of other comics “packages,” superhero comics have remained a staple of American popular culture, and hence a discussion of Asian American comics cannot leave out how these works engage with superheroes. Examining Asian American comics in relation to superhero comics is important not only because superhero comics were the dominant form of graphic literature in twentieth century America, but also because the concept of the superhero touches on themes in Asian American cultural production, such as stereotypes, media representation, and Asian inclusion and place in the American nation. Engaging with superhero comics is especially important for Asian Americans, as historically Asian characters have filled the role of the villain more than the hero. However, as with their handling of other media, *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro* and *Secret Asian Man* reach beyond the issue of correct representations. Adilifu Nama writes that “the significance of black superhero characters is not rooted in how authentically black they are, but in terms of the alternative possibilities a SF sensibility or motif offers for a more complex and unique expression of black racial identity.” While the text that most obviously engages with superheroes is *Johnny Hiro*, *Secret Asian Man* questions the disjunction between stereotypes of Asians and stereotypes of heroes in general, and *American Born Chinese* introduces the Monkey King, who can be read as a superhero as well as the representative of the mythical foundations of superheroes.

Despite the number of superhero titles, scholarly work on superheroes often begins by saying that a superhero is difficult to define. The conclusion is

generally that the superhero is a figure who possesses abilities most normal human beings do not, strength of character, a system of positive values, and a determination of uphold these values (Fingeroth 17). Other aspects of a superhero may include being an orphan, being from another realm or planet, or using a secret identity or disguise (Reynolds 12-16). Writers on superheroes have noted in particular the superhero's relationship to his/her community. Reynolds argues that a superhero is "above the law" but "can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws" (16), and many scholars such as Danny Fingeroth and Mike DuBose have noted how superheroes change to reflect America's social values. For example, the more ambiguous superheroes in *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* arose during the 1980s, which was "a drastically more morally complex era" (DuBose 927) than during the Great Depression and WWII, when superheroes first emerged. While comics of other nations feature heroes with supernatural abilities and secret identities, such as the *Sailor Moon manga* and *anime*, I believe that it is the superhero's intimate relationship to the state that makes superhero comics uniquely American.<sup>43</sup>

Although many conventional superheroes, such as Superman and Wonder Woman, are literally aliens, they are fully assimilated into American society. Smith traces Wonder Woman through her changes with different writers, who first made her very culturally American, then more concerned with more broad human issues, and then back to being American. Smith concludes that "to have Wonder Woman functioning as a world figure with string loyalties to her native home weakens her viability as a thoroughly American figure" (147). Despite (and perhaps because of) the American nature of superheroes, they are figures which enable Asian American participation in American popular culture. In 2009, several Asian Americans working in comics, education, and film came together to solicit and create comics for *Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology*. While recognizing the need for more Asian American superheroes, the editors also recognize that Asian Americans can relate intimately to existing non-Asian superheroes. For example, the introduction on the back cover of the anthology describes an immigrant, "a quiet unassuming guy with black hair and glasses," who knows that he is capable but also knows that he is not recognized for it (Yang, Shen, Chow, and Ma, *Secret Identities*). The editors go on to say that this can be both a description of Asian Americans and of Clark Kent.

In this parallel, the secret identity is figured as empowering instead of the result of cultural split personality, an outlook that *Secret Asian Man* also seems to

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<sup>43</sup> There have been a few American superheroes which have been successful in Japan; for example, the Japanese version of Batman, created by Jiro Kuwata in 1966 when the animated *Batman* series began showing in Japan. However, Kuwata says that he would read American *Batman* comics to pick up general themes, and then reinvent the character and stories completely to suit Japanese tastes (Kidd).

partake in, as indicated by its title.<sup>44</sup> Fingerroth writes that many early readers of *Superman* comics would have been immigrants or children of immigrants who wondered how to reconcile their roots and their new lives in the US, and would have found Superman's secret identity the most appealing aspect of his character (55). Significantly, Fingerroth points out that Superman "can fit in when he wishes and distance himself when he wishes" (56). Superman's disguise enables him to fit it, whereas his abilities as an alien make him an outsider. Like taking part in both mainstream and alternative media to fully claim American popular culture, the dual identity of the superhero allows the editors of *Secret Identities* to ascribe agency to Asian Americans in navigating two (or more) worlds.<sup>45</sup>

One of the anthology's greatest contributions to the superheroes genre is its mapping of the relationship Asian Americans have to the nation onto the relationship that superheroes have to the nation. Scholarship on superheroes often highlights vigilantes, who overlap with superheroes in that some superheroes are vigilantes, but vigilantes need not have superhuman powers. DuBose claims that their difference to superheroes is that they defend what they see as moral while acting outside of socially constructed law or ruling authority (DuBose 918-919), whereas conventional superheroes like Superman work in accordance with the law<sup>46</sup>. As Asians in America have historically been excluded from the state with the law, this has interesting implications for imaginings of Asian American superheroes. For example, Franklin D. Murakawa, who goes by the superhero alias of "The Citizen," is contained inside a high-tech chamber for trying to arrest the president of the United States for war crimes during World War II (Pak and Chang 57). The Citizen's actions are a complex mixture of superheroism and vigilantism. By trying to *arrest* the president (rather than taking a violent course of action such as assassination), the Citizen is acting in accordance with the *law*; however, by trying to arrest the *president* the Citizen is going against the ruling government. The Citizen's system of values differs from that of the government, evident from his belief that the president committed war crimes. However, unlike the Batman of *The Dark Knight*, who fights according to his own independent morality (DuBose 922), the Citizen declares to President Obama that he fights for the people and not the government (Pak and Chang 58), thus aligning himself

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<sup>44</sup> Toyoshima says in an interview that he chose the title as a pun on the television show *Secret Agent Man* and did not intend any deeper connections, but readers have subsequently developed theories. Toyoshima goes on to explain that "Some say SAM is 'secret' because he has assimilated into white American society. Other say he is secret because he is spying on America for an unnamed Asian country. And still others believe SAM is secret because he is so Americanized that there's nothing typically Asian about him. So I suppose if there is an irony to the name, it's that there is no secret" (Mori).

<sup>45</sup> In many ways, the issue of performance that I discussed in Chapter 1 comes into play in superheroes as well. It is hard to argue that Superman is less exemplary as a superhero because he performs the role of Clark Kent, and through this comparison of Superman and Asian Americans, the attacks on Asian Americans being "fake" is also moot.

<sup>46</sup> However, the distinction may not be so clear in practice; DuBose also discusses "police vigilantes," who are aligned with the ruling group but take the law into their own hands (918).

with *American* ideals. The line between vigilantism and superheroism, already blurred, takes on a new significance with regards to Asian American superheroes. Stories like the ones in *Secret Identities* declare Asian Americans as true American citizens by making them superheroes and vigilantes in one figure, allied with underlying national principles but also outside the system so as to critique it.

#### *American Born Chinese* and the Superhero as Mythical Figure

In *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, Richard Reynolds writes that superhero figures can be seen as modern adaptations of gods and heroes from myths and legends. For example, Fingerroth quotes Jerry Siegel on the creation of Superman: “I conceived a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one” (13). Ultimately, Reynolds and Fingerroth both praise the ways in which superheroes reinvent mythical precedents, citing figures such as Joseph Campbell (Reynolds 61-62, Fingerroth 38) to implicitly underscore the superheroes’ wide appeal. In addition, Fingerroth writes that “Although Judeo-Christian comics creators have indeed made superheroes out of Norse, Greek, and Roman godly pantheons – Thor and Hercules, for example are popular superheroes – the handling of these characters are decidedly *secular*,” and “A ‘my god can beat up your god’ type of conflict is precisely what people go into popular culture to *escape*” (24). It seems that Fingerroth is saying that mythical characters are made apolitical; however, given criticism such as “Wonder Woman as Americanized Immigrant,” it would be more accurate to say that mythical figures are removed from their original contexts and Americanized. Superman may have been based on Samson and Hercules, but his catchphrase is “truth, justice, and the American way.” In addition, iconic American superheroes still seem to lack any references to non-Western mythical or religious heroes, pointing towards the absence of multicultural myths and legends in the American imaginative space, even if the nation itself is multicultural. This is reflected in an early *Secret Asian Man* strip that shows non-Judeo-Christian deities looking down from the sky at the United States’ declaration of “God bless America,” with a Buddha figure saying, “Something tells me they don’t mean one of us” (“SAM\_GodBless\_sm”, website 3).

*American Born Chinese* does not include any superheroes per se, but addresses the lack of Asian American superheroes by introducing a basic mythical figure, the Monkey King. At the same time, this graphic novel’s use of the Monkey King is political in the sense that he is not Americanized. Rather, by emphasizing the aspects of the Monkey King’s story that are relevant to Asian American experiences, such as being rejected from the heavenly feast for being a monkey (13-14), Yang is re-politicizing the mythical figure of the Monkey King in an Asian American context.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Perhaps due to Yang originating from a Christian background, the Buddhist themes in the original *Journey to the West* are downplayed in *American Born Chinese*. For example, instead of journeying to the west to retrieve Buddhist scriptures, the Monkey King tells Jin that he delivered packages to the west, and the accompanying panel shows Xuanzhang and his three disciples

In Chinese literature, the Monkey King is the central character of the sixteenth century epic, *Journey to the West*. In this story, he is born from a stone, gains supernatural powers, and seeks to dominate other deities. The Buddha imprisons him under a stone mountain, but after five hundred years, he is offered a chance to redeem himself by accompanying the monk Xuanzang on a quest to retrieve Buddhist scriptures from India. He completes the quest with the help of other disciples and is elevated to Buddhahood.<sup>48</sup> *American Born Chinese* is one of the recent media productions bringing the Monkey King into Western popular culture, others being adaptations in Japanese *animes* and *mangas*, and the Hollywood film *The Forbidden Kingdom* starring Jet Li and Jackie Chan. It is easier to read the Monkey King as a superhero in the context of a comic; the example I gave in the discussion of imagetext shows that many of the Monkey King's fights are depicted by techniques resembling comic action sequences, such as special effects and sound effects that take up a great deal of panel space.

In addition, the genesis and the subsequent abilities of the Monkey King resemble those of superheroes. Although *American Born Chinese* states simply that the Monkey King was born from a rock (Yang 9), *Journey to the West* describes the stone as absorbing the essence of nature and radiance from planetary bodies and being transformed to hatch the Monkey King (Wu 5). This birth of the Monkey King parallels transformations of other superbeings, such as the Sandman being fused with sand inside a particle accelerator, or the X-Men arising from genetic mutations. The result is that these characters are no longer considered "normal." The Monkey King then learns skills such as shapeshifting, the ability to ride on a cloud, and a set of attacks like "fist-like-lightning" and "thunderous foot" (Yang 10). In terms of a system of values, the Monkey King begins by seeking personal recognition through violent means, but on his journey to the west learns to use his abilities to protect Xuanzang and complete their quest. *American Born Chinese* also extends the Monkey King's narrative; his aim in performing the role of Chin-kee is to serve as Jin's conscience (Yang 221). This role is different from that of most superheroes, which is to maintain social order, often with violence. As I will discuss in later sections, Asian American comics creators simultaneously assert that Asian Americans are capable of being conventional action superheroes as well as imagining alternative abilities to define their heroes. In addition to the relevance of his journey to the west for contemporary experiences in immigration and diaspora, the iconic Monkey King functions in *American Born Chinese* to lay the foundations for a type of hero with superhuman abilities that he no longer needs to use for violence, having found other callings and other means.

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delivering gifts to Jesus in Bethlehem (215). While faithfulness to the original text is not an issue, Yang's changes subordinate an Eastern religion to a Western one, and seems incongruent in a comic that asserts Asian American culture and identity against a mainstream American one.

<sup>48</sup> *Journey to the West* has been alluded to in many works of Asian American literature, most notably Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*, where he represents the larger Asian culture that Whitman Ah Sing is trying to integrate with his life in America.



Questioning Superheroes: *Secret Asian Man*

The way that *Secret Asian Man* engages with superhero comics is mostly criticizing the lack of Asian American superheroes and the mainstream assumption that Asian Americans do not fit the image of the superhero. In an early comic, “Hollywood Thanks (or, So how come the Asian hero never gets the girl?),” Toyoshima shows three different scenarios where the same blond woman responds to a White hero, a Black hero, and Sam as an Asian hero (“Never Gets the Girl,” website 3) (see figure 12). The criticism is twofold. The fact that the woman rejects Sam as a romantic partner despite his having done more than the other two men suggests that she finds him physically unattractive, and thus the comic strip criticizes the perspective that Asian men are small and effeminate. However, the exaggerated difference between Sam and the other two men is almost in Sam’s favour, as the two men are laughable caricatures of the square-jawed and muscular hero. Although Sam has defeated 53 henchmen, on the whole his achievements are more scientific, such as curing cancer and building a water fuelled car. Alongside the criticism of Asian stereotypes, Toyoshima criticizes the Hollywood hero type, which is defined by physical strength and action more than anything else.

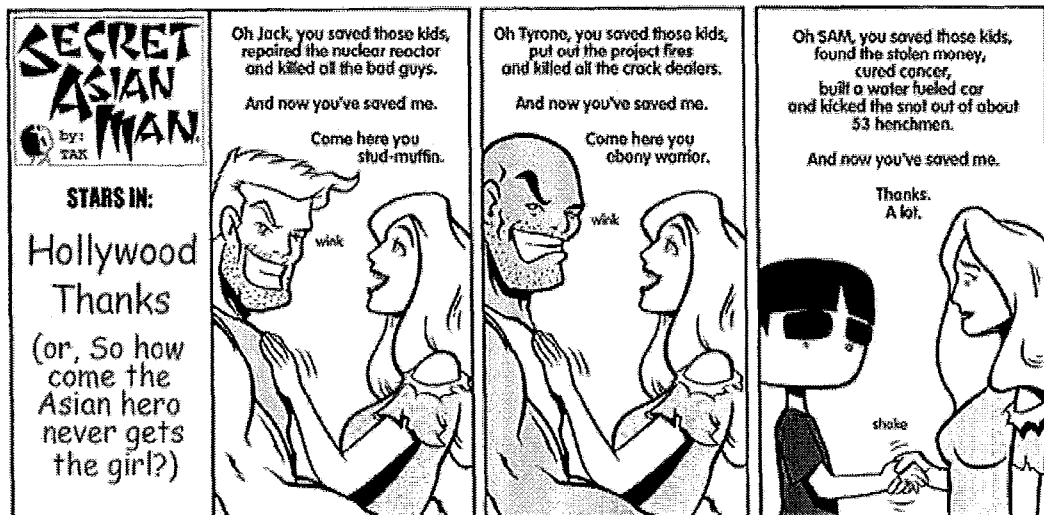


Figure 12. Tak Toyoshima, *Secret Asian Man*. “Never Gets the Girl.” Web. 5 Oct. 2009.

One 2007 comic strip examines superheroes specifically. Sam attends a meeting of superheroes costumed and named after specific animals, such as “Jaguar Jack” and “Scorpion Sue” (19 Aug. 2007, website 1). During the roll call, the leader calls out “Panda Ping Ping” and Sam protests; the leader explains that since he is an Asian hero, he must have an Asian name. While the “Thanks Hollywood” strip portrays “hero” and “Asian” as rarely meeting, this strip shows

that even when superheroes include Asians, they tend to be portrayed stereotypically. *The Outsiders: Asian/Asian American characters in comics* was compiled by “Jenn” for Asian American Heritage Month in 2006, with the aim of listing every Asian and Asian American character in Marvel, DC, and Wildstorm, the three largest superhero comics publishers in the US. A look through the list of Asian Marvel characters shows that Toyoshima’s criticism is justified, especially of Marvel’s earlier characters, who have names like “Silver Samurai,” “Lady Lotus,” and “The Mandarin,” a tendency also found in DC and Wildstorm. Toyoshima’s strip seems to suggest that to be truly included among superheroes, Asians and Asian Americans need to shake off ostensible Asian references. As I discussed in the last chapter, Sam advocates for race-neutral representations in some cases, which can be problematic if it buttresses the normalization of Whiteness.

However, in another strip, Toyoshima suggests the complement, that some White superheroes should not necessarily be White. After watching *Batman Begins*, Sam’s friend observes that since Hollywood has been “race swapping,” Batman should be cast as an Asian character, because “Batman is a raceless character. His race has nothing to do with his origins. He knows martial arts and everything.” Sam himself protests that making Batman Asian would change his character, saying, “for one thing he would be adopted like you” (Toyoshima, “Bat-SAM,” website 3). Sam’s opinion is not necessarily synonymous with Toyoshima’s; however, other critics have made similar claims about superheroes. In “The Asians Are Coming,” filmmaker Shekhar Kapur predicts that “Ten years from now, *Spider-Man* will make \$1bn in its first week, but when Spider-Man takes off his mask, he’ll probably be Chinese. And the city in which he operates will not be New York, it will be Shanghai. And yet it will still be an international film, it will still be Spider-Man.” Accompanying new references to Asian mythical heroes seems to be the possibility that superheroes are not as categorically American as they once were. This recent shift is partly due to superhero stories being increasingly made into Hollywood films, whose production system is global, the greater presence of Asian Americans in the American media industries such as comics, and the economic rise of Asia. In Chapter 3, I will go into more detail regarding how the rise of Asian countries as economic powers impacts American popular culture.

### Unconventional Heroes

If *Secret Asian Man* questions the stereotypes of superheroes and of Asian Americans, then *Johnny Hiro* sets out to create an unconventional superhero. It must be noted that superheroes have diversified since their initial conception; for example, when not Spider-Man, Peter Parker is a teenage science nerd who is not particularly big or strong. That *Johnny Hiro* directly references superheroes is a result of this diversification, as well as the diversification of the comics industry. Arguably, no one in *Johnny Hiro* is a superhero, as no one has any superhuman

abilities, least of all Hiro himself<sup>49</sup>. In the last section, I argued that the serial *Johnny Hiro* enables Hiro to be reinvented like other mainstream superheroes. In the following section I will discuss how the visual representation of Hiro's adventures references other superhero comics and establishes itself as a highly unconventional one.

On the whole Hiro is an extremely average young American, bussing at a restaurant to make ends meet and trying to avoid entanglements with his landlord. Hiro is also physically ordinary. Chao does not give statistics regarding his characters such as age and height, but in "Smack My Fish Up" Hiro seems to be a little taller than Gwen Stefani, who is 5'6". In comparison to other characters such as Mr. Masago or Akon, Hiro is also quite thin. Also, unlike some superheroes such as the Hulk, he cannot change physically or acquire any additional powers. Even if Hiro is not a blatant stereotype like Chin-kee, he represents the small and skinny Asian. With the tagline "Half Asian, all hero," Chao answers Toyoshima's "Hollywood Thanks" by showing that despite being an ordinary and physically unimposing Asian American, Hiro can still be the hero and win Mayumi's affections. In addition, Hiro's full name is a play on "Johnny Hero," a sports action figure created in 1965, whose tagline is "All-American Athlete" (Shores 1). Johnny Hero action figures have blond crewcuts and blue eyes and appear muscular, an image that Chao subverts in Hiro.<sup>50</sup>

Despite not having any superpowers, Hiro manages to live through many situations that would kill a real life human being. The first issue reveals how Hiro had encountered two fatal experiences, falling through the floorboards as a young child and getting into a car accident when he was twenty years old. Significantly, the first of Hiro's falls evokes two different superheroes. The narrator explains that Hiro had been playing Spider-Man in an abandoned building, and his reflex response to the fall resulted in broken arms but no other injuries. In addition, Hiro's fall also echoes the fall young Bruce Wayne takes into a well filled with bats (*Batman Begins*). While Hiro's two falls are not as traumatic as Batman's, the recounting of his earlier days functions almost as superhero origin stories. In addition to his miraculous survival, Hiro subsequently manages to survive an attack by Gozadilla, swings between buildings on a power line in "Lobster Run" (another reference to Spider-Man), and in "Smack My Fish Up," drives a van off New York's Triboro Bridge onto the street below. These adventures also evoke the way that superheroes master urban spaces and use space to their advantage. That Hiro is able to accomplish similar feats lends greater support not only to the

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<sup>49</sup> The only character in the comic who seems to be a superhero is Mayumi's mother, whose technical prowess is piloting a giant robot, and she only appears in Gozadilla's flashback regarding his experiences in 1978 Tokyo. However, as Chao plans on further *Johnny Hiro* stories, perhaps Mayumi's mother will have a greater role in future issues.

<sup>50</sup> It is possible to see athletes and military personnel in a similar social role as superheroes, as these figures show physical prowess and perseverance and their work makes them representatives of certain geographical areas. A superhero's costume is also echoed in sports and military uniforms.

assertion that Asian Americans are capable of superhero action, but that through their actions they are claiming American physical spaces.

It seems that these feats are a part of the comic rather than of the characters; *Johnny Hiro* sets a fantastic and comedic tone. *Secret Asian Man*, like many comic strips, shows its characters from eye level with few special effects. In contrast, Chao focuses a great deal on capturing motion in action sequences and depicting them with dramatic angles. The difference between these two titles suggests differences in the way different forms of comics evolved. While newspaper comic strips seem to show influences from earlier satirical broadside printing, mainstream comics exhibit to a greater extent the visual strategies used in film. For example, this two-paged spread from “Big Lizard in My Back Yard” shows Hiro jumping off the roof of his home to save Mayumi from Gozadilla (see figure 13). Scott McCloud suggests that film could be seen as a very slow comic (8), and Chao exploits this relationship between film and comics to emphasize that Hiro is capable of superhero-like action, using a lower angle of view and four images to show the arc of Hiro’s leap. At the same time, the dramatic visualization also highlights how unlike a superhero he is. Although the first three images of Hiro show his purposeful expression and spectacular jump, by the fourth image Hiro is panicking. In addition, he is wearing a t-shirt, pajama bottoms and Mayumi’s bunny slippers.

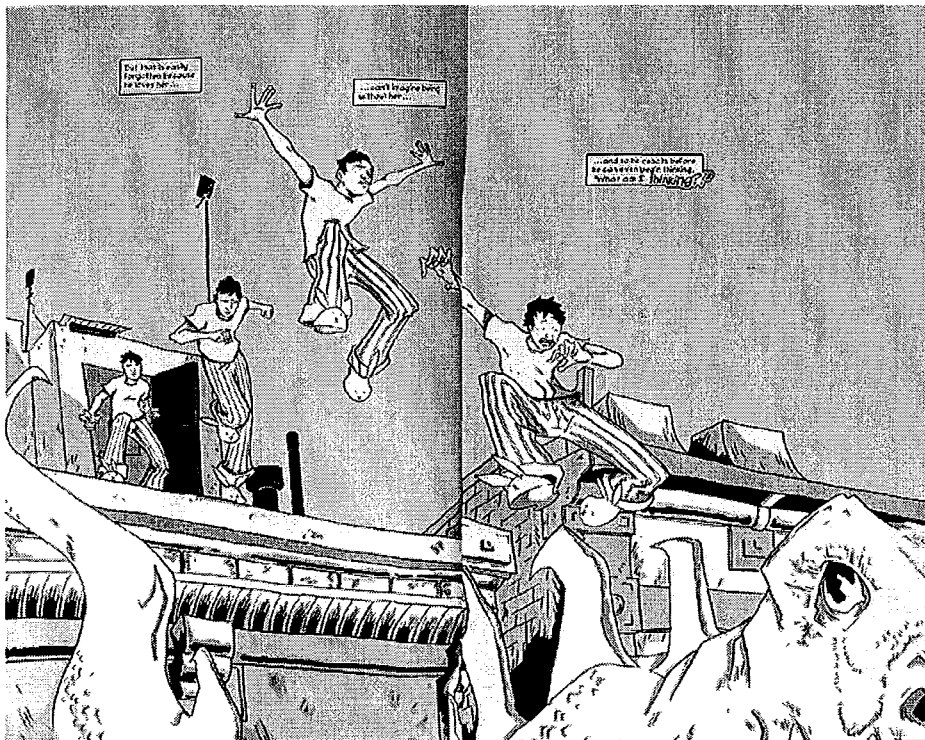


Figure 13. Fred Chao, *Johnny Hiro* (Richmond, VA: AdHouse Books: 2009). “Big Lizard in my Backyard.”

One strip from *Secret Asian Man* also establishes a similar effect (see figure 14). The nameless and dark metropolis in the first two panels is used often in superhero stories, and coupled with dramatic narration, suggests that the subject is some sort of vigilante. The last panel reveals the subject to be “Little Old Chinese Lady” (“SAM\_ oldladyhero\_0503,” website 3) who is wandering the night streets picking up garbage. In both this strip and in *Johnny Hiro*, Chao and Toyoshima assert that Asian Americans are capable of superhero action without needing to conform to standard Hollywood or comic stereotypes. Indeed, after Mayor Bloomberg tells Hiro and Mayumi that he is personally sorting out the Gozadilla attack to maintain New York’s reputation as a desirable place to live, Mayumi hugs Hiro and exclaims, “Oh Hiro. You save me *and* real estate market” (Chao, “Big Lizard”). Although the comics at times display a disjunction between the dramatic techniques and the characters, this disjunction is humorous. The contrast between Hiro’s cute domestic attire and panic and his heroic action does not invalidate his heroism; rather, the contrast highlights his bravery. Likewise, the humour does not target the old Chinese lady and Hiro as social/racial outcasts but functions as satire against the overdone camera angles in *Johnny Hiro* and the bombastic language in the *Secret Asian Man* strip. Even as Toyoshima and Chao assert that Asian Americans are capable of heroic action, they are parodying the conventions of heroism by introducing their own comic elements. Again, Asian American comics simultaneously seek a place for Asian Americans within mainstream superhero depictions as well as provide an alternative.

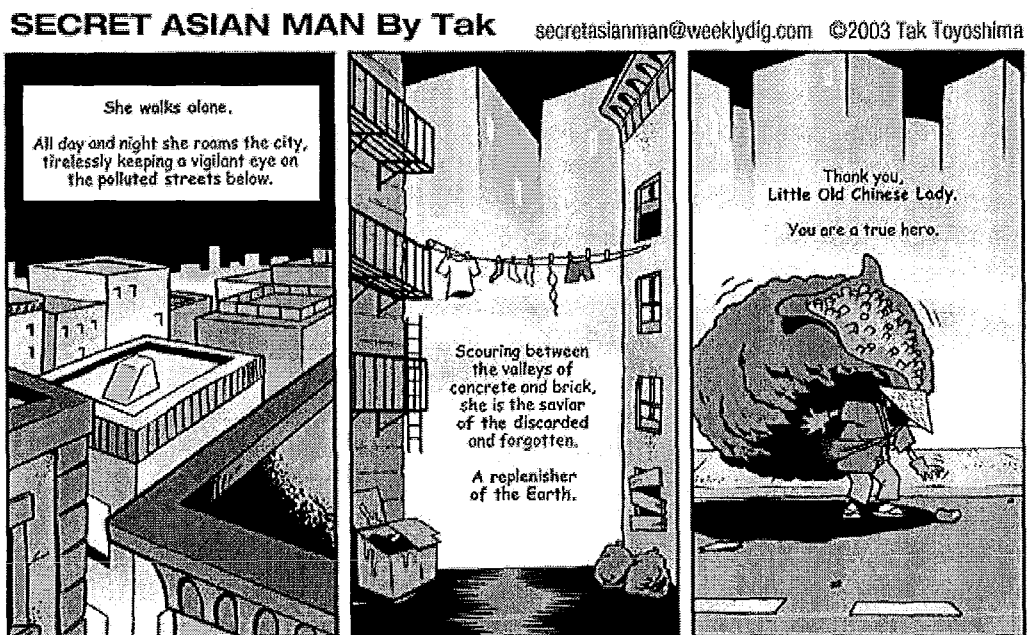


Figure 14. Tak Toyoshima, *Secret Asian Man*. “SAM\_ oldladyhero\_0503.” Web. 5 Oct. 2009. Website 3.

### The Future of Asian American Superheroes

As the contents of *Secret Identities* show, there are increasing numbers of Asian Americans working in the comics industry. As well as alternative comics like *Johnny Hiro*, Asian American writers and artists in mainstream superhero comics have created new Asian and Asian American superheroes. One of the most celebrated of these is Amadeus Cho, a Korea-American created by Grek Pak and Takeshi Miyazawa for Marvel comics. At first Cho is a sidekick to the Hulk and later paired with Hercules in *Incredible Hercules*. Writers at [AsianAmericanComics.com](http://AsianAmericanComics.com) are careful to note that Cho is not a sidekick to Hercules but a co-star (aacomics, “Amadeus Cho”), and that he is the main character of a currently running miniseries (aacomics, “Amadeus Cho Gets Own Miniseries”). Significantly, Pak and Miyazawa created Cho as a reimagining of a minor (and non-Asian) Marvel character named Master Mind Excallo from 1940 (Knoll). In many ways, Amadeus Cho is an ethnic minority rewriting of Marvel comics history, parallel to and part of rewriting Asians in America back into American national history, which is an aspect of claiming America. In addition to greater numbers of Asian Americans in the industry, non-Asian writers and artists have started to create Asian and Asian American characters who are not stereotypical or essentialist. For example, Dixie in Mike Carey’s *Re-Gifters* is a vivid character who has her own blend of strengths and shortcomings, and who develops and matures throughout the comic.

Dixie is also one of an increasing number of Asian American comic book heroines. Claiming superheroes as a site for Asian American representation has great risks for excluding women, as male superheroes still often rely on images of hypermasculinity. This is important especially for Asian American studies, as the gender debate between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston has been a watershed issue that helped to redefine the field’s theoretical focus. As *Johnny Hiro* and *Secret Asian Man* have shown, assertions that Asian men can be masculine are made alongside criticisms of the superhero stereotype. Asian American writers and artists are also attentive to creating or re-inventing Asian and Asian American superheroines that refute the image of the submissive Asian female and who are more complex than the stereotypical Dragon Lady. For example, *Secret Identities* includes a section specifically devoted to Asian American superheroines. In the study guide to the anthology, the editors write that they seek to offer “depictions that are strong but three-dimensional, dealing with real-world issues like family expectations, peer pressure and body image, as well as the more extraordinary ones that costumed crimefighters face” (Yang, Shen, Chow and Ma, “Secret Identities Discussion Guide: Section Three: Girl Power”). In “You Are What You Eat,” Ting, who has an eating disorder, receives a belt from her grandmother for her birthday, which she believes helps her lose weight. Ting later discovers that it amplifies the property of foods which have a “hot” or “cold” effect (properties in Chinese medicine), which gives her the ability to dry up swimming pools and emerge unharmed from burning buildings (Chen).

*Secret Identities* also features superheroes from Vietnam and the Philippines, as well as Muslim superheroes. This diversification of Asian American superheroes represents acts of claiming America with recognition of critical issues that Asian American studies have been concerned with. Like other media programs discussed in Chapter 1, neither Asian American reworkings of superheroes nor comics as a whole try to uncritically assume the place of the mainstream. Indeed, the historical developments of comics forms, such as that of the comic strip, enable Asian American creators to adopt both an alternative and a mainstream stance at the same time. In addition, the central place of images in comics allows Asian American creators to critique existing stereotypes and develop new strategies of visualization. I will also explore the potential of visual representation for popular material culture in the next chapter.

### Chapter 3

In the last two chapters, I discussed the potential for claiming America through various forms of media and focussed on comics as one of these forms. However, many things designated as popular culture are not media but material objects, which have different social significances from media and require other visualization strategies, and hence offer another route to claiming America. This is especially important as Asian and Asian American material culture have come under attack from the mainstream. Lee argues that while other ethnic minorities in the US were seen as outsiders for lacking culture, newcomers from Asia were seen as degenerate for having “an excess of culture” (36), which films tried to represent through Orientalist clutter (Lee 133). In addition, the representation of the Chinatown material environment also suffers in Frank Chin’s approach to claiming America, as in an effort to distance himself from Chinese traditions, he also painted Chinatown as corrupt and declining under a mask of false glitter (Kim 181-182).

As I will show, Asian American comics depict bodies of Asian and Asian American material cultures that are different from mainstream American popular material culture, but this difference is not that the former is more “traditional” and the latter more “progressive”; rather, due to the complexities in globalization, objects from Asia are shown as popular culture alternatives for Asian Americans. In this manner, the comics claim America by showing not only people but things from Asia establishing a place in the United States. I will first discuss the importance of illustrating material cultures in Asian American comics, then discuss recent shifts in globalization to prioritize Asian popular culture, and finally examine key popular Asian objects in *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro* and *Secret Asian Man* which illustrate the complexities of transnational material cultures to structure Asian American identities.

#### **Material Culture and Strategies of Visualization**

Ian Woodward usefully characterizes material culture as “any material object (e.g. shoes, cup, pen) or network of material objects (e.g. House, car, shopping mall)” (14) and defines “object” as something human-made and intended for some use (15). With the broad definition of popular culture as “culture of the people,” any human-made object can be classified as popular culture. However, as I have shown in the introduction, many theories regarding popular culture approach it as an outcome of industrialization, and it is also of note that the material objects that Woodward lists can all be entangled in systems of industry and globalization. In addition, while arguably all human-made objects have a function, many material objects in popular culture have what Arthur Asa Berger calls a “latent function” as well, such as ripped clothing denoting membership in the punk subculture.

I have mentioned in the introduction that the visual nature of comics allows a different consideration of the issues of race than textual narratives. Although Viet Thanh Nguyen writes about the potential of comics for elucidating the visual



dimension of race (“Masticating Adrian Tomine” 12), the affordances of graphic literature are not limited to the physical appearance of the characters but include the appearance of the environment, atmosphere, and even sound (through visual representation of sound effects). Arguably, film can achieve this effect as well. However, early critics of film such as Horkheimer and Adorno and Walter Benjamin argue that film it is one of the greatest tools of the culture industry, as it drags the audience along to the quick pace of moving images, and hence keeps them from reflection (53). While this is overly pessimistic, and does not reflect current modes of film viewing such as the ability to pause and rewind, I argue that it is still easier to re-examine details in print rather than film. Scott McCloud offers the idea of “closure,” which is the reader filling in the actions that happen between comics panels (64). While transitions in film also require the audience to construct different scenes as part of a narrative sequence, arguably films running 24 to 30 frames per second within scenes require less “work” on the part of the audience than several panels in a comic depicting only key moments in a scene. Potentially, then, comics are more open to interpretation because there are a greater number of instances requiring the reader to supply meanings, rather than being held tightly to the sequencing of film. Hence, the comic represents a merger of the power of visual representation and time for contemplation. Asian American comics can use the slower temporality of the comic to represent their own material environments in a manner more conducive for reflection.

The theory of the “reality effect,” first discussed by Roland Barthes, is useful to consider the power of material representations to structure ideas about the world. Barthes’s argument is that narrative often gives many descriptions for a setting, which does not contribute to the plot or the story’s main idea. He argues that the accumulation of details in text functions rather to convince readers that the environment it is describing is real and makes them forget that it is a representation, that it is “discursive” rather than “referential” (137). The reality effect can function visually as well, as the following example from Arthur Asa Berger illustrates:

It is the clothes they wear and the setting in which we find them that help establish, in our minds, what kind of people are being portrayed. Consider what is conveyed in theatre by a top hat, monocle, and spats. These are all, semiologically speaking, symbols we must learn. Once we do, however, we are ready to assume...that people wearing this kind of clothing will be upper-class and aristocratic and to assume, further, that they will behave in certain ways. (Berger 77)

Berger is essentially saying that representations of material culture in theatre form a reality effect whose descriptive details (in this case, costume) are ascribed referential value to some kind of reality external to theatre (the behaviour of people wearing similar clothing). The reality effect is not produced textually but visually, and films such as *Broken Blossoms* have been able to teach supposed truths to audiences about real-world Asians and Asian Americans through

constructed material environments such as opium dens. What Asian American comics create with their representations of Asian material culture is a proliferation of reality effects from different cultural perspectives; because the reality effect equates reality with representation, Asian American comics can potentially change readers' views towards Asian Americans, and thus have material effects on the lives of Asian Americans.

Before I discuss the ways in which Asian American comics depict Asian and Asian American products, I would like to note that *American Born Chinese* critiques the apparent neutrality of mainstream American material environments by also presenting mainstream environments as neutral, then subverting them through comparison with Asian American material environments. There does not seem to be anything notable about Jin's and Danny's schools, but closer examination reveals that they lack signs of any ethnic culture other than a mainstream American one. The day Wei-chen arrives at Mayflower Elementary, for instance, there is a map of the US hanging on the blackboard behind him (Yang 36), and the name of the school also refers to the history of the colonization of America by Europeans. The classrooms of Danny's school are filled with teaching materials such as a poster of George Washington (111), a map of the Americas to illustrate Columbus's voyage (112), and a bust of Shakespeare (119). These representations fit into Barthes's definition of the reality effect – they are incidental details which do not seem important to the events of the narrative, but make the classrooms in the comic seem like real life classrooms. Importantly, Yang's representations of these objects are easily overlooked, meaning that in general, readers have accepted that these objects are parts of a "normal" classroom. Like Dyer's theories regarding Whiteness, mainstream American culture establishes itself as neutral. I argue that this apparent neutrality is achieved by hiding behind the illusory reality effect, which, like Whiteness and Americanness in *American Born Chinese*, tries to erase itself as discursive. However, as Yang structures the Danny and Chin-kee narratives into a sitcom to reveal the constructedness of the "normal" American life, he also calls into question the normative environments that make up this lifestyle.

Another strategy that mainstream American culture uses to normalize itself is to draw attention to the Other. As racialized bodies are "marked" while Whiteness is "unmarked," Asian objects stand out in the American suburban environment. Yang adopts Jin's classmates' point of view to represent Jin eating alone and highlights his chopsticks and dumplings (32-34). Readers would also note that Jin no longer brings Chinese food to school, and tells Wei-chen to speak English between bites of his sandwich (37-38). As Jin tries to assimilate into the mainstream culture at Mayflower Elementary, the comic also removes Asian material objects from its representations. However, Yang sandwiches the narrative set in Jin's and Danny's schools between representations of Asian American material environments. Early in the comic, Jin narrates his stay in Chinatown as an infant. One panel shows a view of San Francisco Chinatown

through Jin's apartment window, with numerous business signs in Chinese, including a sign for McDonald's in Chinese (25) (see figure 15). This shows that McDonald's is not only localized in Asia but has modified itself to cater to domestic Chinese American populations. Similarly, the end of the comic takes place in 490 Bakery Café, located in the Chinatown of Oakland, California.<sup>51</sup> The store sign of 490 Bakery Café is written in English and Chinese, and its menu is entirely in Chinese. By beginning the comic with the story of the Monkey King and Jin's infancy, the Asian and Asian American material representations have primacy and become a point of comparison for the suburbs, which come later. The last impression that the comic leaves readers is the café, another Asian American material environment. Through this juxtaposition, Yang displaces the White American suburbs as "normal" and "neutral" material environments.

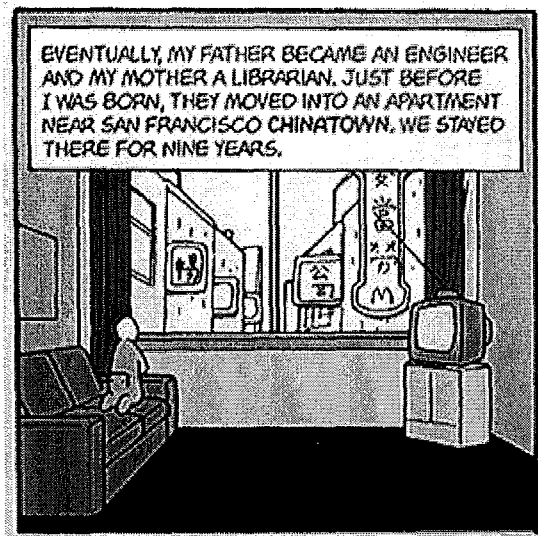


Figure. 15. Gene Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second, 2006). 25. Note the vertical sign to the right side of the window, which reads "McDonald's" in Chinese.

In the face of the false neutrality presented by American material culture, Asian American comics adopt a similar strategy by creating other material realities through the subtle build-up of Asian popular culture products rather than rejecting the reality effect altogether. Even *Secret Asian Man*, which contains comparatively simple and geometrical art, leaves ample room for the display of Asian popular culture products. For example, Toyoshima draws Sam's son Shin owning Totoro toys and clothes (Toyoshima, 3 July 2007, website 1; 18 Apr. 2010, website 2) and getting a Hello Kitty piñata for his birthday (30 Jan. 2007,

<sup>51</sup> Although Yang does not explicitly reveal the bakery's location, the address and a part of the telephone number are on the business card that the Monkey King let drop after reverting Jin back to his true form.

website 1). Even Sam himself has pyjamas patterned with Doraemon (25 Nov. 2007, website 1).<sup>52</sup> Significantly, the main points of these strips do not require the presence of these specific cartoon characters. In the January strip with the Kitty piñata, Sam is horrified that children can beat up a cartoon figure and then appear to be devouring its guts (the candy), and in the November strip Sam is explaining to his cousin Simon that he woke one morning to find that one of his eyebrow hairs grew four inches overnight. In the April 2010 strip in particular, Sam evokes a plethora of Japanese cultural displays to advertise the Haru Matsuri festival, a Japanese spring festival (see figure 16). Ostensibly, the target of Sam’s advertising is his friend Charlie, who is apprehensive about going to an event that sounds “too ethnic.” However, as Sam and Charlie are *talking* to one another, the *images* of Japanese culture constitute a representational strategy that Toyoshima is using to depict Japanese material culture to his readers in an appealing manner, which includes Shin in a Totoro hat as well as images of kendo and taiko drumming.



Figure 16. Tak Toyoshima, *Secret Asian Man*. “Morgan Hill Haru Matsuri 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemorative Strip.” 25 April 2010. Web. 14 May 2010. Website 2. Note Shin in a Totoro hat at the bottom left corner of the second panel.

<sup>52</sup> Totoro, Kitty, and Doraemon are all popular Japanese cartoon characters. Totoro is a giant woodland spirit from the 1988 anime *My Neighbour Totoro* by Hayao Miyazaki, which was one of the first animes to receive critical acclaim outside Japan. *Doraemon* features its title character, a robot cat from the future who travels back in time to help the main character, Nobita, with his preteen social problems. Finally, Kitty and her family and neighbours are all part of the international *Hello Kitty* franchise, which I will discuss further on in this chapter.

There is a difference, however, between representing material culture evoking Asian traditions and material cultures evoking popular Asian trends. I argue that Hollywood films such as *Broken Blossoms* and *The Cheat* have already co-opted visible signs of Asian tradition and Orientalized them. For example, Lee argues that the Japanese merchant Tori in *The Cheat* represents entrapment associated with Asian material exports, which are objects such as painted wall screens and figures of Asian mythical figures, elephants, and the Buddha (*The Cheat*, 1915, film still in Lee 125). In addition, an accumulation of such representations also figures Asian as somehow ancient and “behind” the West, and functions as a sign of inferiority or as vessels for Western nostalgia. Asian popular culture, however, is an alternative, which I will discuss in relation to globalization in the next section.

### **Globalization and Popular Culture**

“Popular culture” has been associated primarily with Western popular culture, especially American modernism, which involves industrialization and mass production. The Americanization thesis argues that the US, as the centre, spreads its material culture to the periphery. Even if objects are not symbols like language, the latent function of material objects is often to carry a set of values or imply a way of life, and the spread of American products also promotes American ideas and lifestyles. Therefore, while the US has great economic power compared to other countries, the spread of American popular culture products also raises its “soft power” (Nye, qtd. in Napier 5). This is illustrated in one *Secret Asian Man* strip that criticizes the discrepancy between spreading ideas of American liberty and actual conditions of work due to capitalist industrialization (Toyoshima, 13 Apr. 2008, website 1). In the strip, a Chinese father goes to America after seeing a flyer advertising the US with the Statue of Liberty; he is greeted by the statue upon arrival, only to end up working as a dishwasher in a restaurant. He decides to send his daughter a Statue of Liberty as a souvenir, which his daughter happily receives, yet the last panel reveals that the souvenir was made in China. Not only does this strip show that the image of America as a desirable place to live is strongly reinforced through the global proliferation of American popular culture; it also shows that many non-American populations are made to believe a myth about America that maintains itself through their exploitation.

However, scholars have recognized that globalization cannot be described by a simple centre-periphery model; just as the culture industry thesis changed to accommodate the diverse meanings consumers make of products, the Americanization thesis has accommodated studies showing that consumers at the “periphery” are not “cultural dupes” but rather that they localize imported products and values in ways to suit their own lives. For example, Arjun Appadurai writes that “as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to be indiginized in one or other way” (295). Both Appadurai and Jan Nederveen Pieterse recognize that localization results in hybridization, and hence fears that globalization would result in standardization

are unfounded. While the Chinese family in *Secret Asian Man* unquestioningly accepts the image of America projected by the Statue of Liberty, the Backstreet Boys parody from the “Back Dorm Boys” in Guanzhou, China (which the last panel of *American Born Chinese* references) shows that there are more critical attitudes towards the spread of American popular culture.

Nederveen Pieterse raises Japanese modernization as an example of a less Western-centric approach to globalization, which is to speak of “globalizations” and examine how different societies develop into particular forms of modernity (164-165). It is not only that Asian countries receive and localize products from Europe and the US, but also increasingly export their own products. David Palumbo-Liu argues that the Japanese are increasingly seen as technological and economic rivals who “called into question the ability of the United States to monopolize the prerogatives of modernity” (38). The “modern” image of Asia is illustrated in a *Secret Asian Man* strip where Simon is driving Sam and complaining that “If commercials are any reflection of reality, we Asians would be driving around in our import cars, talking on our cell phones and playing video games all day.” However, Sam asks him to repeat himself, as he is in the back seat of their imported car, distracted by his cell phone and handheld gaming console (14 Nov. 2006, website 1). While Simon voices a legitimate concern regarding essentialism in the media, this strip suggests that Asians are no longer only being associated with stereotypes such as martial arts, but rather with contemporary high-tech products. As Parikh notes, the dominant images of Asian Americans in the age of transnationalism are no longer the yellow peril or the model minority, but rather “young, attractive, professionals with access to and ease with the material symbols of socioeconomic status—cars, hi-tech sound systems, cellular phones, etc.—and participation in trendy social and leisure activities,” and moreover “Asian Americans have garnered an enviable position in American culture” (859).

However, Japanese cultural critics distinguish between *mukokuseki* products and non-*mukokuseki* products. *Mukokuseki*, which literally means “not registered in a country,” denotes products that do not carry latent associations with their countries of origin. The cars and cell phones in the November 2006 strip of *Secret Asian Man* would classify as *mukokuseki*, as they can be advertised without reference to Asian values and lifestyles. However, this is also changing. While before the 1990s Japan was seen as a “faceless economy” with no cultural influence (Iwabuchi 2), Japanese media and cultural products are now distributed in other Asian countries and around the world. For example, *manga* and *anime* from Japan generate a variety of images of Japan as modern, postmodern and futuristic, and circulate in North America along with North American popular culture. Economically, that Asia is exporting products to other parts of the world means that Asian nations have become competitive in the world market. Moreover, this means that the image Asia projects of itself is not that it is more traditional than the West but rather it matches the West in developing towards its own modernity and is even surpassing it.

One figure that illustrates this in *Johnny Hiro* is “Gozilla,” a reference to Godzilla.<sup>53</sup> In the first chapter entitled “Big Lizard in my Backyard,” Gozilla comes to New York to take revenge on Mayumi, whose mother had helped to defeat it in Tokyo in 1978. Woodward’s definition of material culture also includes the networks that material objects form in physical space, which is particularly useful to considering *Johnny Hiro*, a comic that emphasizes the city space of New York. In the last chapter, I noted that having the Asian American Hiro interact with New York’s physical spaces as a superhero would (being chased, leaping off buildings), the comic claims America through American public spaces. The other side of this claiming America is that “Big Lizard in my Backyard” draws a parallel between New York and Tokyo, decentring New York from its privileged place as a modern metropolis. The first panel of the story features New York at night time, with the caption “New York City: The Tokyo of North America. It’s a city large enough to boast that it never sleeps...” (Chao, “Big Lizard”). At the same time it shows affection for New York, the narrative voice nonchalantly places Tokyo at the reference point for this comparison. The comic also shows images of Tokyo, which are presumably in Gozilla’s memories. For the transition from Gozilla in New York to Gozilla in Tokyo, the comic uses a technique borrowed from the match cut in film, where the first of two almost identical panels shows Gozilla with New York buildings, and the next panel shows Tokyo buildings in roughly the same positions (see figure 17). In film, match cuts are used to provide a sense of continuity (“Cut” 78), and by using a similar technique in “Big Lizard,” Chao again links and equates Tokyo and New York.

Tokyo is not only on par with New York, but surpasses it. Critics have recognized that Asia has ceased to be figured as the past for the West, but rather the future (Palumbo-Liu 372), and in the segment showing Gozilla’s attack on the Tokyo of 1978, Tokyo is depicted as a hybrid of traditional Japanese culture, a growing industrial and consumer society, and a futuristic world of high technology (see figures 17 and 18). Although Tokyo features a sumo wrestler, woman dressed in a kimono, and the gate of a temple, it also features office buildings, numerous store signs and billboards, and a giant robot. Of these, Super A-OK Robot stands out and is recognizable as a sign of high technology, and it also references the numerous Japanese popular science fiction media which imagine a Japanese future filled with such giant robots. In addition, while the original Godzilla is created by American nuclear science and is a reminder of past events, the Super A-OK Robot reflects a vision of Japanese science and technology for the future.<sup>54</sup> Chao not only shows that Japan represents America’s

<sup>53</sup> While satirical uses of media personalities are permitted, featuring merchandise in comics (as in films) may be problematic. Therefore, *Johnny Hiro* references Godzilla and Hello Kitty but uses slightly modified forms of these characters and approximations for names.

<sup>54</sup> The imported technology shown in *Secret Asian Man* and the futuristic robot shown in *Johnny Hiro* may raise the status of Asians and Asian Americans in the eyes of the West; however, that association between Asians and consumer materiality is also problematic. Parikh notes that the

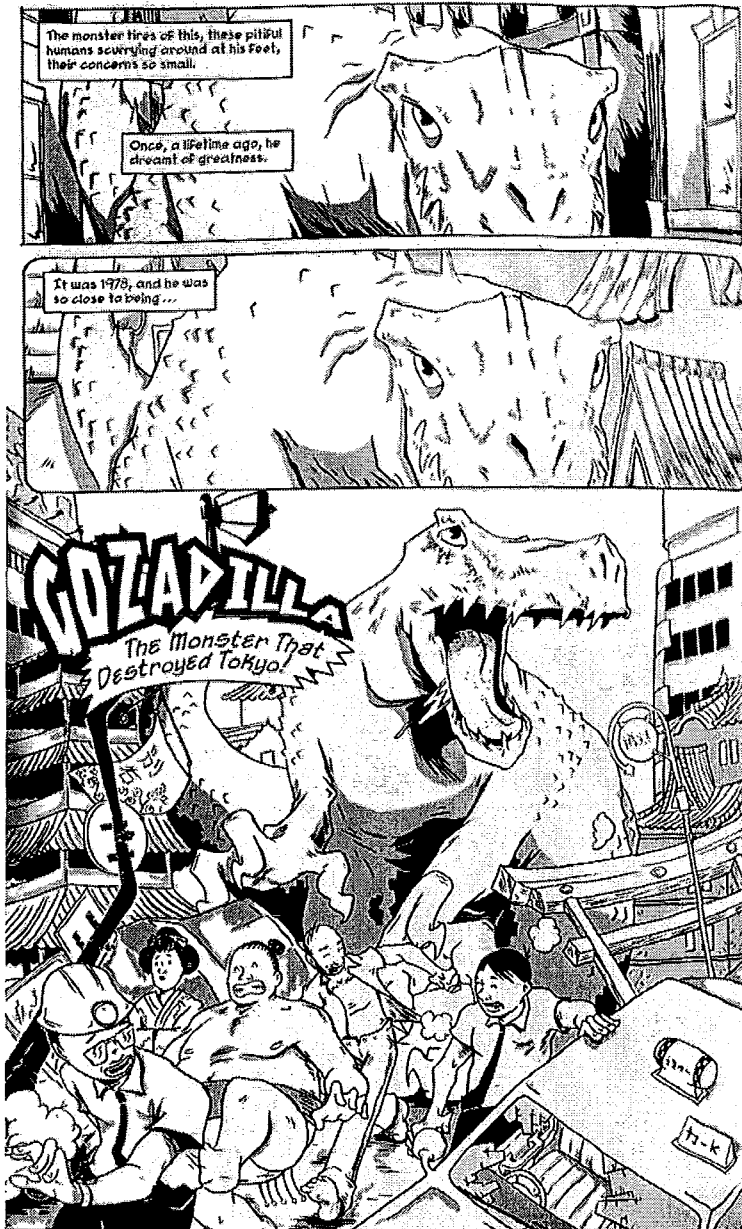


Figure 17. Fred Chao, *Johnny Hiro* (Richmond, VA: AdHouse Books: 2009). “Big Lizard in my Backyard.”

young, urban Asian Americans are labelled “rice boys” and occupy enviable positions in American culture, which she contrasts with the yellow peril (859). However, I argue that the relative affluence of professional Asian Americans could also morph into fears that foreigners are occupying positions of status. In addition, if the “rice boy” image becomes an essentialized view of all Asian Americans, it could elide class differences in the Asian American community and be used to support backlash against policies such as affirmative action by portraying an ethnic minority as having “made it.”



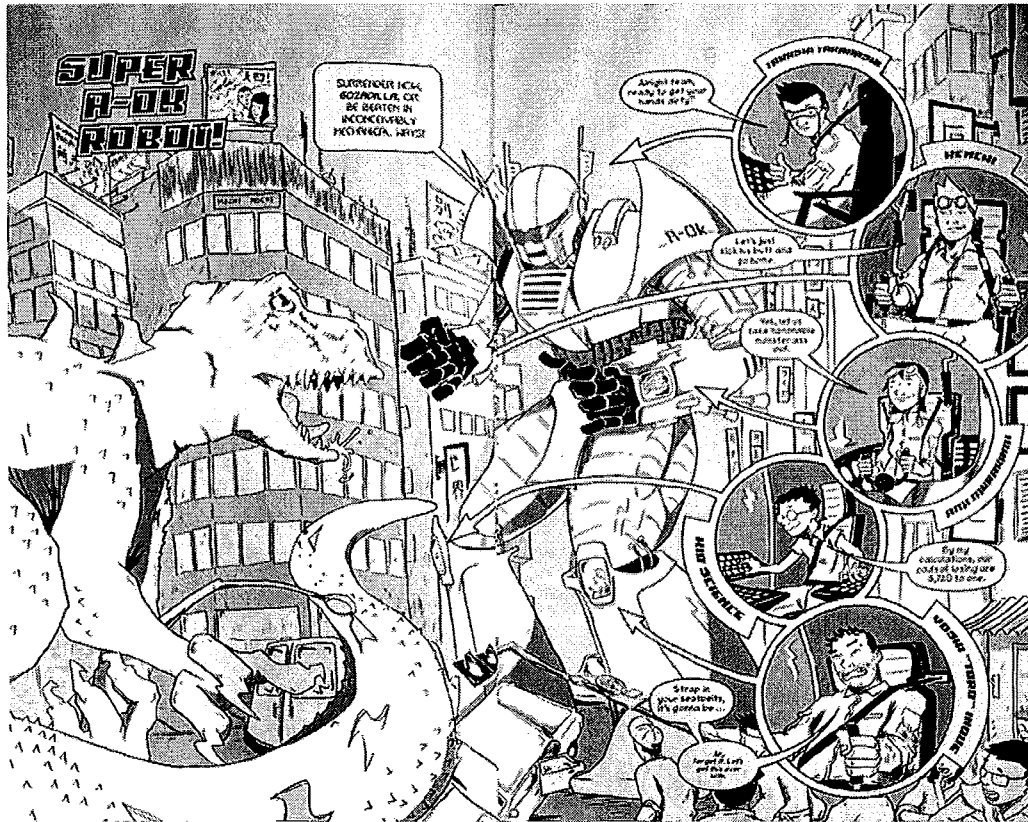


Figure 18. Fred Chao, *Johnny Hiro* (Richmond, VA: AdHouse Books: 2009). “Big Lizard in my Backyard.”

future, but that the Japanese urban landscape could simultaneously hold elements from its own past, present and future, thus displacing America altogether as a reference point.<sup>55</sup>

It is also significant that in *Johnny Hiro*, America is not isolated from Japanese material proliferation. Other than Mayumi’s Hello Bunny products in New York, this is especially evident in the figure of Gozadilla, who invades New York. The character of Godzilla was first conceived in the 1954 Japanese film as

<sup>55</sup> Arguably, Chao’s imaginings of Tokyo also suffers from the same exoticism that pervades novels such as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and *Idoru*, which Palumbo-Liu criticizes for reiterating boundaries between the US and Japan even as they try to imagine a cyberspace without national boundaries. Palumbo-Liu argues that in *Idoru*, Gibson imparts a feeling of disjunction for a futuristic Tokyo by mixing in contemporary signs of Japanese difference, such as the avocado-coloured public telephones (379), and associates Japan with hallucinatory fantasy in *Neuromancer* (377). I argue that although *Johnny Hiro* also presents Tokyo as a fantasy landscape and a mix of anachronistic elements, it delights in this postmodern material culture pastiche rather than associates it with hallucination and alienation.

a monster created from American nuclear testing, and later became a national hero, fighting against other monsters trying to invade Japan. However, in the Japanese *Godzilla* films, it never invades America, and in the 1998 Hollywood adaptation, the monster does not have Japanese origins. The Gozadilla in *Johnny Hiro* directly references Japan and also directly confronts Japan with America. Rather than representing post-WWII Japan and a criticism on nuclear science, however, Gozadilla is a creature of the postmodern and hybrid Japan I discussed previously and not of a realistic post-war Japanese society. Thus, instead of confronting the US with the legacy of atomic bombing, Gozadilla seems to be confronting America with the reality that Asian popular culture is ascending and spreading to the West. Chao said in an interview with *Brokenfrontier.com* that he has never thought of popular culture as simply American popular culture, and therefore included elements of Asian popular culture as well (Croonenborghs). In addition, the fact that the comic features a flesh-and-blood lizard rather than Godzilla-related media evokes the proliferation of Asian popular culture objects which take up physical space in the American landscape. Gozadilla functions as a vehicle to move readers between the two modern metropolises of Tokyo and New York and to register their new relationship.

### **Popular Objects of Asian American Identity**

Many studies of the globalization of culture consider localization to be indigenous populations' modifying of the culture brought in by individuals and corporations outside their culture, such as Appadurai's example of American popular music being popularized in the Philippines and circulated for far longer than in America (29). The presence of Asian popular culture products in the lives of Asian Americans, however, involves a slightly different dynamic. As a whole, Asian Americans are disseminators of products foreign to America, but as Americans, they are also the recipients of these products.

I argue that the localization of Asian popular culture falls into the "horizontal" model of cultural transmission, which Lisa Lowe contrasts with the "vertical" model. Lowe argues that until the 1990s, Asian American literature followed a vertical model and concentrated predominantly on the transmission or the loss of the "original" culture through family narratives, creating an either/or identity that does not take into account hybrid cultural identities (135). Given that popular culture is no longer figured as monolithically American, Lowe's theories provide a fitting framework to examine how Asian Americans turn to Asian popular culture rather than family tradition to work through their Asian American identities. This applies to Asian American cultural production as well; for instance, while Gene Yang draws upon the traditional myth of the Monkey King for *American Born Chinese*, he is also adopting and reworking the Backstreet Boys parody from the Back Dorm Boys, who have become a popular culture sensation in Guangzhou, China. For Jin, performing as one of the Back Dorm Boys signals a turn towards Asian perspectives on American popular culture instead of uncritically believing that he must fit into it.

As jibes from his classmates regarding his Chinese foods are partly what drive Jin to assimilate into White American ways of life, food is also an area where Jin's reconciliation with being Chinese American takes place. Two popular drinks, American cola and Asian bubble tea, are juxtaposed in the comic. Although the coke that Danny's friend Steve drinks is not specified to be Coca-cola, cola is associated with American popular culture franchises and their spread around the world. Like Gozadilla invading New York, Chin-kee peeing into Mike's cola is a direct contamination that parallels the intrusion of Asian foods into American culture. As an answer to coke, Jin orders bubble tea daily at 490 Bakery Café as he waits for a chance to meet Wei-chen again. Significantly, bubble tea is not a "traditional" Asian drink; invented in Taiwan in the 1980s ("BBT History"), bubble tea is a modification of traditional teas and has become a part of Asian popular culture that has migrated to North America. It is over this drink that Jin reconciles with Wei-chen, and by extension, with his Asian American identity. Yang devotes half a page to an image of Jin and Wei-chen's bubble tea cups (Yang 230) (see figure 19), and Wei-chen's way of accepting Jin's apology is to recommend a better bubble tea café (232). While it is the Monkey King (a traditional mythical figure) who turns Danny back to Jin, it is Jin who must decide how to structure his life, and his meeting at 490 Bakery Café with Wei-chen over bubble tea represents a "horizontal" transmission of Asian popular culture among peers.

Other than bubble tea, another line of Asian popular culture products that Yang introduces to signify an Asian American identity is the Transformers action figure Jin and Wei-chen own as young children. While Wei-chen's monkey Transformer was given to him by his father, the Monkey King, before he left heaven to live among humans on earth, the presence of Jin's Transformer toy represents the complex transnational history of franchises such as *Transformers*. Transformers toys were created in Japan in 1983, and are an example of many *anime*, *manga*, and videogames featuring giant robots. Hasbro, a US game and toy company, initially worked with the Japanese company Takara to release Transformers toys in North America, and then worked independently to flesh out characters and stories. Takara distributed *Transformers* in Japan and created exclusive Japanese toys, and due to Japan's exports to the rest of Asia, the toys and stories were distributed there as well. Marvel published a series of comics for *Transformers* in the US, while numerous animated series were produced both collaboratively and independently. As a young boy, Jin watches these animated series on television with his friends in San Francisco Chinatown. Although the comic does not state which series the boys are watching (or which country wrote and produced it), it is of note that the boys' comments on the series are in triangular brackets, denoting a translation from Mandarin Chinese (23, 26). This panel and the following panel depicting the boys staging battles with their



Figure 19. Gene Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second, 2006): 230.

Transformers toys create a vision of Asian American popular culture space which contrasts with Jin's days at Mayflower Elementary.

The nature of the Transformer toy suggests latitude in the ability to change; it is associated with shifts in Jin's life. As the second storyline that opens in the graphic novel, Jin is depicted sitting in the backseat of his parents' car as they move away from San Francisco, glumly holding his Transformer. Interestingly, panels showing Jin are interrupted by panels illustrating the story that Jin's mother tells him, regarding a boy who imitates the professions of his neighbours as he constantly moves (23-24). The ending of the story is that the boy settled near a university, and therefore took up mathematics, science, and history. Jin's mother tells him this traditional Chinese story and privileges the ending according

to her values of studiousness and hard work. However, the panels showing Jin suggest that he is taking comfort not from this traditional story but from his Transformer. Moreover, the Transformer shifts the focus from the boy's academic identity at the end of the story to his successive changes, and also foreshadows the changes Jin must make, such as adapting to the largely White American way of life at his new school.

Doughty argues that that Jin's Transformer toy and his wish to become a Transformer when he grows up (Yang 27) forms a continuity with his later desire to transform into a White teenager (55); however, Transformers and Jin's desire to become White seem to be two contrasting forms of transformation. Although Wei-chen's Transformer toy changes from a robot human to a monkey and is supposed to remind him of who he "really" is (217), I argue that the nature of a Transformer robot toy is that neither its vehicle form nor its humanoid robotic form is the "original"; both possibilities are present. Likewise, for Asian Americans, neither being Asian nor being American is more "real" than the other. While the bubble tea in *American Born Chinese* might be seen as Asian and not Asian American, I believe that the double agency of a Transformer toy and its transnational nature as a merchandise item make it a symbol of Asian American subjecthood. While Yang does not return to the trope of Transformers at the end of the comic, Jin's reconciliation with Wei-chen and with being Chinese American means that to a certain extent, he has become a Transformer.

### **Remaining Consequences of Global Production**

The *Secret Asian Man* Hallowe'en strip from 2006 show an Asian American girl and a White American boy talking about their costumes – the boy praises his mother for sewing his superhero costume in his father's workshop, to which the girl replies, "That must make my mom more awesome than yours. She sewed 500 costumes for other kids in her boss' sweatshop" (Toyoshima, 31 Oct. 2006, website 1). This strip is one among many imagining the conditions of work in Asia and for ethnic minorities in America to produce American popular culture products. Although Asian American comics reveal the increasing Asian cultural and material exports to America, *Secret Asian Man* reminds readers that this does not mean that global cultural and material productions are equal.

If the graphic match cut technique Chao uses in *Johnny Hiro* shows a positive continuity between the US and Japan, *Secret Asian Man* uses a similar mirroring technique to show the differences between the US and Asia with respect to material production and to critique practices such as outsourcing. A 2007 strip features Sam and his family shopping for housewares: Sam, picking up a mug labelled "Made in China," asks Marie, "Ever wonder what it looks like where these are made?" Toyoshima uses an identical layout for the bottom panels to show a family in a Chinese factory, where the father asks the mother, "Ever wonder what it looks like where these are bought?" (26 Aug. 2007, website 1)



Figure 20. Tak Toyoshima, *Secret Asian Man*, 26 Aug. 2007. Web. 9 Oct. 2009. Website 1.

(see figure 20). While I have shown that Asian American comics are representing the increase of Asian popular culture products from Asia, the 2007 strip reminds readers that a great part of material cultural production from Asia is still *mukokuseki* products, and moreover *mukokuseki* products that are not making profit for Asians or Asian Americans. In addition, these strips reveal, perhaps unintentionally, the imbalances among different countries in Asia. In another *Secret Asian Man* strip, Charlie invents an air conditioner brace from “quality parts from China” only to have it fall on his downstairs neighbour, while Sam calls out “Send the bill to China!” (1 June 2008, website 1). While Asian countries are experiencing economic growth and are networked together in organizations such as the ASEAN and the APEC, the place they have in the global imagination is quite different. For example, while Palumbo-Liu discusses neo-Confucianism largely in relation to China’s new economic systems, he discusses Japan through Gibson’s conceptions of cyberspace. While Japanese popular culture products are seen again and again within *Secret Asian Man*, *American Born Chinese*, and *Johnny Hiro*, there are few equivalents from other Asian countries. Indeed, Yano states that while Hello Kitty exports to other countries in Asia are almost identical to Japanese Hello Kitty products, exports to America only overlap with Japanese products by about 20% (“The Realm of Kawaii”). While arguably people in Asia are culturally more similar to one another than Americans are to Asians (and even this claim is increasingly tenuous), Hello Kitty could be seen as an aspect of Japanese imperialism in Asia.

However, differences among different Asian countries do not necessarily translate to divisions among different groups of Asian Americans. I argue that the presence of Hello Kitty in America, and Chao’s reference to Hello Kitty with “Hello Bunny” in *Johnny Hiro*, signifies an adoption of a transnational icon as a point of identification for Asian Americans. In “Big Lizard in my Backyard,” Hello Bunny is advertised in 1978 Tokyo and is also part of Mayumi’s collection

in New York; like Gozadilla, Hello Bunny is also an Asian material product that has entered the US. Hello Kitty, the real-life counterpart of Hello Bunny, is likewise transnational. Sanrio, the designer and manufacturer of Hello Kitty, is now a transnational company with a headquarters in San Francisco. In the US, the largest body of Hello Kitty consumers have been Asian Americans (Yano, "The Consumers"); those Asian Americans that Yano interviewed state that they fondly remember going to Chinatown or Japantown to purchase Hello Kitty products, and that it was a way of investing in an Asian icon to build an Asian American identity (Yano, "The Consumers").<sup>56</sup> This phenomenon also illustrates the consumer agency emphasized in studies of popular culture, where individuals take empowering meanings that the culture industry cannot predict. With the tag of "Half Asian, all hero," Hiro is arguably meant to represent all Asian Americans, and the fact that Chao references Hello Kitty and Godzilla as counterparts to American popular culture shows that the localization of Japanese products changes their Asian significances and refigures them as potential figures of identification for all Asian Americans.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, although Toyoshima created Sam, a Japanese American, the issues raised in *Secret Asian Man* cover a variety of Asian American and Asian concerns. In *Secret Asian Man*, the imbalance between Asian countries in terms of material production can potentially become a rallying point for pan-Asian political consciousness.

### **Beyond the Panel: Material Tie-ins**

While a large number of Asian products are featured in Asian American comics, in real world America, Asian popular culture products are still outnumbered by American popular culture products. By reworking the popular American action figure of Johnny Hero into an Asian American in his comic, Chao is adding an Asian American lens to the perception of the original Johnny Hero, and taking a step to address the imbalance between mainstream American popular culture products and Asian popular culture products. In *Secret Asian Man*, Toyoshima often suggests innovative alterations to mainstream American material culture to compensate for the lack of Asian and Asian American products on the market. Halloween strips often show the characters striving to dress up as something relevant to Asian Americans despite the lack of Asian America-related store-bought costumes. In 2009, Sam's son Shin rejects a Transformers costume

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<sup>56</sup> Because of Hello Kitty's versatility, this product line is also growing in popularity among mainstream Americans. For example, celebrities such as Mariah Carey and Britney Spears have publically displayed Hello Kitty products. Hello Kitty now has stores in places such as Times Square in addition to Asian malls and Chinatown or Japantown (Yano, "The Consumers").

<sup>57</sup> As I have noted in Chapter 1, the representation of solely Japanese-American sushi restaurant staff in *Johnny Hero* does not reflect the actual demographics of restaurant workers of Asian descent, and overlooks the coincidence of class and various Asian American ethnicities. While all of Asia is beginning to challenge the West economically, there is still a prevailing sense that Japan is ahead of the other Asian countries. Hence, Chao centring his comics around a Japanese American while he himself is a Chinese-American may not result from a pan-Asian consciousness, but rather a desire to put forth the most "positive" and acceptable Asian ethnicity.

owing to the bad sequel, and demands to dress up as Leroy Chiao, Fred Korematsu, or a 442<sup>nd</sup> battalion soldier,<sup>58</sup> to which Sam replies “Not sure if Target stocks those” (Toyoshimma, 25 Oct. 2009, website 1). However, *Secret Asian Man* does represent changes to store-bought costumes, as in 2007 when Sam styles his hair to look like Astroboy (28 Oct. 2007, website 1), whereas two years later their department store is shown to sell Astroboy masks.

In addition, Toyoshimma also tackles this underrepresentation by creating actual material products related to his comic. For example, in May 2010, Toyoshimma uploaded an Asian Pacific American Heritage Month greeting card as his weekly comic strip, as “Hallmark isn’t going to make one any time soon” (9 May 2010, website 2). In addition, as there are material products associated with fictional characters such as Kitty and Totoro, Toyoshimma sells products related to *Secret Asian Man* on blacklava.net, an online store specifically devoted to selling Asian American media and products such as apparel, stickers, and buttons. Currently, there are around ten different *Secret Asian Man* t-shirt designs on sale, as well as buttons featuring Sam as a sumo wrestler or Bruce Lee. Toyoshimma not only critiques the absence of Asian American products in America, but is actively making changes. In addition, while Asian popular culture products provide an alternative to mainstream American popular culture products, Toyoshimma is also a part of the effort to create material objects that reflect a distinctive Asian American consciousness.

Asian material cultures in Asian American comics reflect the changes taking place in globalization, where Asia is increasingly envisioned as synchronous with the West and as developing bodies of distinctive popular culture that pose challenges to the spread of American popular culture. Due to the social positions of these Asian popular culture products, they can potentially become rallying points for Asian American identification. The creative use of Asian popular culture products in comics also reflects the meaning of “claiming America” in an age of transnationalism. Establishing a place in America does not mean becoming more like mainstream White Americans, nor does it necessarily mean co-existing with White Americans in a separate space, but rather it means making mainstream Americans transnational as well in their consumption of Asian popular culture. Like Kingston claiming America by showing, for example, early Chinese railroad workers leaving their mark on the land (Kim 209), Asian American comics are claiming America by showing the place of Asian material products, in addition to peoples, leaving a mark in the American landscape.

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<sup>58</sup> The individuals that Shin lists are prominent Asian Americans. Leroy Chiao is an acclaimed astronaut with NASA; Fred Korematsu was a Japanese American who tried to resist forced relocation during WWII and was vocal in protests against discrimination until his death; the 442<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was a decorated regiment composed mostly of Japanese Americans during WWII.



### Conclusion

It is possible to see from *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro*, and *Secret Asian Man* that the concern on the part of Asian Americans for the project of “claiming America” remains strong, even if theoretical shifts have emphasized elements in the literature of ethnic minorities pertaining to transnationalism and diaspora. As the last chapter has shown, claiming America and transnational concerns are not mutually exclusive, but transnationalism can be mapped onto claiming America to produce a new outlook regarding what it means to subscribe to Asian popular culture and also assert oneself as an Asian American. Similarly, debunking popular stereotypes of Asian Americans is not over, but recent studies such as Tina Chen’s exploration of the potential for double agency in performance also lend new strategies to such cultural projects. As new stereotypes (such as the “rice boy”) are generated, Asian American cultural production also needs to continuously respond to these challenges, just as they negotiate the forces of mainstream incorporation through reinvention and play.

In addition, the examination of Asian American comics is a relatively new focus. As comics scholarship is a burgeoning academic field, input taking up Asian American comics or the comics from other marginalized communities is vital so that the field develops fully. In the Introduction, I portrayed the development of Asian American studies as going from ethnic nationalism to a recognition of multiplicity. However, there is also a recognition from postcolonial studies that the celebration of fluidity and postmodern fragmentation are theoretical privileges that newly independent nations and marginalized peoples may not find convincing or relevant. Much of current scholarship on superheroes tries to locate figures which trouble the typical WWII-era superhero, such as examining the flawed and tormented characters in *Watchmen* or arguing that Chester Brown’s *Louis Riel* problematizes the notion of a clear-cut national hero. In light of the focus on deconstructing stable identities, volumes such as *Secret Identities*, which tries to work out a place for Asian Americans in American history and popular culture through the centrality of the superhero to the American nation, may seem out of place and a throwback to earlier (and no longer popular) desires for certainty. Perhaps my focus on claiming America may seem this way as well; however, I believe that nuancing frameworks is more useful than jettisoning them altogether, and it is important to create specific theories for Asian American studies of comics as well as to draw upon dominant theoretical approaches to comics.

In my thesis, I have focused on the contents of Asian American comics. Although I examined *American Born Chinese*, *Johnny Hiro* and *Secret Asian Man* as different packages of American comics, I did not delve into their publishing process and circulation, such as their cataloguing and display in libraries and bookstores and their print runs relative to other popular comics. Further study as to the social positions of these comics would lay stronger foundations for arguments regarding their impact in popular culture. In addition, while I focused

on popular culture objects in Chapter 3 due to the frequency of their appearance in the three text I am studying, other Asian American comics (and also *Secret Asian Man*) reference Asian media, such as Japanese popular music mentioned in Derek Kirk Kim's *Good As Lily*. A related field of study would be to further examine the influence of Japanese *manga* on Asian American comics. McCloud argues that differences between Japanese and Western comics do not simply lie in artistic style, but that each favours different storytelling paces, levels of abstraction, strategies for special effects, and effects for transitions between panels (44, 77, 270). A useful study would be to also examine the change in mainstream American comics due to the influence of Asian comics.

In the Introduction, I justified my choice to limit my chosen texts to ones which deal most consistently with ethnicity and popular culture. However, comics such as *Angry Little Girls* and *Good As Lily* offer unique perspectives with respect to the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and popular culture, which I have not extensively examined. I have suggested that the monopoly of superhero comics publishing in the US may have contributed to Asian American comics being a more male-dominated field than Asian American textual literature; however, it is important not to repeat the mistakes of early ethnic nationalists such as Frank Chin and inadvertently reinscribe gender stereotypes or limit "claiming America" to only Asian American males. It is possible to focus more on the female Asian America characters in my three chosen texts, such as Suzy Nakamura in *American Born Chinese* and Mayumi in *Johnny Hiro*, and critique the lack of central Asian American women in *Secret Asian Man*.

As more Asian American comics are published, it is important to examine the coincidence of ethnicity, sexuality, and popular culture as well. A related concern is that in all Asian American comics creators, especially in the creation of Asian American graphic novels, there are a greater number of Americans of East Asian descent. As Koshy points out, earlier Asian American literature all too uncritically mapped theories generated from the examination of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean American texts onto emerging Filipino and Vietnamese American literatures (327-328). I have posed arguments for the way in which Asian American comics claim America based on only three central texts, and there may be other strategies from other Asian American (or Asian Canadian) communities that remain to be explored. Studies of Asian American comics and popular culture need to recognize how texts respond to challenges from mainstream American popular culture but to also take into account differences within the Asian American community if they wish to claim America for the full spectrum of Asian Americans.

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