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UWS 41b: Huddled Masses: Immigrants in America

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What is a Nation?

The rise of powerful nations is considered a relic of the past and frequently goes unquestioned. What characteristics of these nations make them so great? What compels the people of these nations to put their lives on the line to protect their fellow members? Benedict Anderson, a Marxist historian and political scientist, tackles these questions and the origins of nationalism in his book *Imagined Communities*. Anderson begins by addressing several paradoxes of nationalism, the most pertinent being the lack of a concrete definition for nationalism. He proposes a workable definition of his own wherein nationalism invents nations where they do not exist (6). In his view, a nation is defined as a socially constructed community distinguished by the style in which it is imagined (6). Nations are perceived to be imagined because members of the community will never know each other face to face, but they will share similar interests, as well as identifying as part of the same nation. Throughout *Imagined Communities*, Anderson places emphasis on the key ideals of a nation: their status as imagined, sovereign, limited, and a community. These key ideals are also reflected in the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. *American Born Chinese* tells the story of three individuals — the Monkey King, Jin Wang, and Danny (Jin's alter ego) — on a journey that ultimately intertwines their destiny. In the process of depicting their stories, *American Born Chinese* tackles the struggle of maintaining cultural values as an immigrant in a new place that pressures you to assimilate. In all the story lines, the main character feels judged by his surrounding community. This analysis will argue that *American Born Chinese* magnifies Anderson's idea of nations being imagined while also exposing a shortcoming in his claim regarding nations being imagined particularly as a community. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on

the story of Danny and his cousin Chin-Kee because their story explicitly addresses Anderson's claim regarding nations as both imagined and as a community.

According to Anderson, nations are perceived to be imagined as a community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). This idea revolves around the notion that no matter how much injustice may prevail in a nation, there is still a sense of pride and a common sense of understanding and values that binds members together. ABC highlights this concept with Danny and Chin-Kee, his cousin who visits yearly from China. Danny, who happens to be the white alter ego of second-generation Chinese immigrant, Jin Wang, is a popular high student who is starting to get nicely accustomed to his new high school. That is, until the untimely arrival of Chin-Kee. When Chin-Kee first arrives at Danny's house, he is dressed in traditional Chinese clothing and depicted as a happy and loud giant (Yang 49). Chin-Kee, standing next to Danny's father, occupies more space in the frame. Chin-Kee's size contrasts that of the door behind him and the lamp beside him because it shows that he is drawn in an exaggerated fashion, not true to scale, or else he would not have fit through the door. The change in size is meant to emphasize how out of place Chin-Kee is when he is around Danny and his family. This foreshadows how Chin-Kee will be negatively treated and exploited throughout his time in America. Despite knowing what lies ahead based on his previous visits, Chin-Kee's first remark, "Harro Amellica!" (Yang 49) demonstrates how happy he is to be visiting again. The caption on the bottom of the frame says "HA HA HA ... CLAP CLAP" in all capital letters which mimics his movements because one of his feet is in the air, implying that he must have been doing a loud dance to show his barely contained excitement.

Though Chin-Kee is happy to be visiting again, the feeling from Danny is not mutual. In actuality, Danny despises his cousin when he visits every year. On his first day at school with Danny, Chin-Kee endures several judgments from other students and Danny himself. In a prime example, Chin-Kee is seen eating lunch with an annoyed Danny sitting next to him (Yang 117).

Danny has his hands folded on the table and his lips are slanted to show how annoyed he is to be sitting with Chin-Kee. The frame is zoomed out to capture the other students who are freaked out and pointing at Chin-Kee and Danny sitting at the table. With the frame zoomed out, both Chin-Kee and Danny are placed at the center of criticism. As a popular student, Danny is concerned about what others would think of him sitting at a table with his weird cousin. In the following frame, Chin-Kee asks Danny if he wants to try “Clipsy Flied Cat Gizzards Wiff Noodle” (Yang 117). Danny answers him with “Leave Me Alone,” but his attention is on the two members of the basketball team standing disgusted behind Chin-Kee. The negative reaction of the students is an example of what Anderson claims to be the inequality some may face within a nation. Chin-Kee continues to come to America despite already knowing how Danny and other people react to his presence. The negative images created by Chin-Kee linger long after he has returned to China and because of his affiliation, Danny is left with no choice but to start over at a different school. This time around, Danny tries harder to minimize the usual damages of Chin-Kee’s visit by limiting who his cousin speaks to and how he behaves in public. When Danny finds Chin-Kee singing on top of a table in the library, he quickly grabs him by the hair and pulls him outside. When outside, Danny releases his pent-up frustration in the form of verbal and physical attacks toward Chin-Kee (Yang 205). Even after their altercation, Chin-Kee tells Danny that no matter how much he gets attacked he is still coming back to America. He states, “Sirry cousin Da-nee. Chin-Kee ruv Amellica. Chin-Kee rive for America. Chin-Kee come visit evely year ... forever (Yang 211). This level of commitment is what Anderson believes compels people to fight for their nation. So many millions of people are willing to die for the limited imaginings a nation entails because of the sense of fraternity created (Anderson 7). Chin-Kee probably continues to overlook his mistreatment because he is able to fulfill needs he otherwise may not have been able to fulfill in China. For instance, he goes to school with Danny every year and because he is receiving an education he may not have access to in China, he has something more than marginalization to look forward to whenever he visits.

However, with that being said, Chin-Kee's determination to stay in America reveals a flaw in Anderson's claim regarding nations as a community. Anderson fails to account for nations like America that are comprised of many different nationalities, heritages, and ethnicities. There is a wide array of nationalities present within America, but there is still a desire from those with multiple nationalities to protect America. An example of this is an Australian born person serving in the U.S. army and willing to fight against Australia if necessary. Anderson does not provide an explanation as to why some people renounce their membership from a nation to join another nation. Additionally, Anderson does not elaborate on what aspects of a nation make horizontal comradeship outweigh the inequality one may face in one nation if they also belong to another nation. For example, Chin-Kee faces criticism in America that he would not necessarily face in China, but he insists on still visiting America every year. Anderson's claim regarding nations as a community does not explain why someone like Chin-Kee, who belongs to more than one nation, would choose to protect a nation that mistreats him as an outcast, when he can go back to his other nation and fit right into society. There are possibilities to consider like a war or a lack of opportunities that could explain why someone like Chin-Kee would still make the journey to an unjust America. Whatever the case may be, Anderson fails to provide any sort of explanation for people in Chin-Kee's situation, as well as those who choose to abandon a nation for another one entirely.

Chin-Kee is depicted as an outcast because he is meant to symbolize the many stereotypes that exist against Asians. One such stereotype is academic superiority, which is depicted on the first day Chin-Kee attends school with Danny. In the first class, Chin-Kee raises his hand to name the three branches of government. He goes, "Ooh Ooh! Chin-Kee know dis one!" (114). Danny immediately says "Put your hand down!" (114). When Chin-Kee answers the question correctly, the teacher follows up with "You know people — it would behoove you all to be a little more like Chin-Kee" (114). This annoys Danny even further because it is Chin-Kee's first day of American school,

and he already knows more than a great majority of students in class, calling attention to himself. For the next four classes, history, science, math, and Spanish, Chin-Kee has his hands raised in the exact same position and Danny has his hands over his eyes to hide his frustration with Chin-Kee. The repetition of these frames highlights how Chin-Kee exemplifies the American narrative that Asians kids are the smartest ones in class. This narrative is how many Americans justify the mistreatment of Asians within schools because they are perceived to be nerds susceptible to being bullying by “typical” Americans.

Another such inequality is the depiction of Asian cuisine as comprised of disgusting creatures. During lunch time with Danny, Chin-Kee appears to be eating cats, lizards, and noodles (Yang 117). The other students in the lunch room are all looking and pointing at Chin-Kee’s food with shock and disgust (Yang 117). This captures the misguided and problematic belief in America that all Asians only eat cats and rats. Furthermore, as Danny is on his way to serve detention for being late to class, he hears laughter coming from behind him. Two students stand in the hallway mimicking Chin-Kee’s eyes by pulling their own back and sticking out their front teeth like a rat (Yang 124). Though these inequalities seemingly mimic Anderson’s claims regarding the inequality that appears in a nation, they actually further expose the holes in his argument. The attack on Chinese culture is an inequality that takes place in America, but not in China. Anderson claims that nations are imagined by individuals with shared interests, but Chin-Kee does not appear to have any similar interest with anyone in ABC. Anderson’s shallow claim leaves one to wonder why Chin-Kee would leave China just to face inequality and exploitation.

It can be concluded that Danny mistreats Chin-Kee because he is not a part of Danny’s imagined community which comprises of the jocks and students who make up the popular crowd of “normal” white Americans. After all of Chin-Kee’s visits, Danny is forced to transfer schools because his imagined community no longer sees him as a worthy member. When Steve from the basketball team asks Danny if he is “Ah ... Hanging with a new crowd?” (118), Danny responds with “No. This

is my cousin Chin-Kee” then quickly adds that “He’s just visiting” (118). The No from Danny’s response is the only word bolded which symbolizes the emphasized force behind the word. Danny’s has his back turned to Chin-Kee and his side-eyed glance makes it clear how much he hates being around Chin-Kee. Furthermore, in the next frame, Steve asks Chin-Kee how long he is planning to stay in town, but Danny quickly interrupts and completely changes the subject before Chin-Kee can answer. He asks Steve, “Hey, you ... you happen to have an extra copy of the game schedule?” (119). The pause after Danny says “you” the first time goes to show that he thought of the question on the spot in an attempt for Steve to not talk to Chin-Kee. Danny considers Steve apart of his imagined community and fears that Chin-Kee will ruin the imagined community he is working so hard to recreate at his new school.

Danny begins to sense the destruction of his imagined community when Melanie rejects him for a date. Danny gets heated and claims, **“I’m nothing like him! I don’t even know how we’re related”** (126). This statement is also bolded to once again capture the strong emotions behind Danny’s words. Danny in this moment assumes that Chin-Kee is the reason why Melanie rejects him because Chin-Kee has a history of ruining his life. After missing basketball practice because of detention, Danny engages in a conversation that leads to him opening up to Steve. He talks about how he has to transfer schools every year and rebuild himself and his community, and then gets serious as he says, “then he comes along for one of his visits” (219). He does not refer to Chin-Kee by his name with fear that he might appear and ruin his moment with Steve. The frames zoom into his eyes shows his arched eyebrows suggesting his anger when talking about how his cousin always ruins the imagined community he constructs for himself. When Danny slips to reveal that Chin-Kee peed in Steve’s coke, Danny is seen with clutched fists walking away from a barfing Steve (132). His facial expression takes that of someone who already knows what is bound to happen. The clutched fists indicate that Danny is angry to be losing his imagined community and senses that may be too late to salvage it. The “HA HA HA ...” at the bottom of the frame seems to be Chin-Kee’s laughing

inside Danny's head to show that Chin-Kee is constantly on his mind even when he is not physically there. The frame immediately following an angry Danny is a zoomed-out picture of Oliphant High School which one can assume will mean that Danny will transfer schools in order to rebuild a new imagined community. The picture of the school in the frame prior to Chin-Kee and Danny arriving at school (112) is the same picture used after Danny is angrily leaving the building (133). The difference between the two images is the time of day which serves the purpose of showing how Danny's imagined community is destroyed within the span of a day. This provides context for Danny's claims that whenever Chin-Kee comes to visit he has no choice but to transfer because of the damage that has been done to his perceived imagined community.

Danny and Chin-Kee's story serves the purpose of bringing attention to two of Anderson's claims regarding a nation. ABC uses the story of Danny to show how imagined communities are built to include people who share similar interests. It also shows that imagined communities influence how people are treated. Even though Chin-Kee is his cousin, Danny never considers him part of his imagined community and hence treats him like an outsider just like everyone else. Despite the mistreatment from Danny and others, Chin-Kee always returns to America knowing full well what is going to happen. Chin-Kee's story reveals the hole in Anderson's claim that deep horizontal comradeship outweighs the inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each nation (7). Chin-Kee associates himself with more than one nation, something Anderson also fails to address, but chooses to still come to the one where he faces exploitation. Anderson's claim does not provide an explanation as to why someone like Chin-Kee would choose to fight for one of his nations as opposed to the other one. It is unclear how Chin-Kee conceives America as a deep horizontal comradeship, when he receives nothing but hate and disgust from those around him in ABC. Anderson's definition of a nation needs to be altered to address these flaws exposed by ABC. Until then, the definition of a nation is once again up for interpretation as it awaits a concrete and workable definition.

Works Cited

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