

GENE YANG on STEREOTYPES

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Apparently, MySpace has made American Born Chinese a featured book... Not all good news, though, since it seems to come with a rather tasteless ad campaign that uses the Chin-Kee character out of context, and has led to all kinds of discussions among people who haven't read the book. Gene Yang responds.

Does acknowledging a stereotype perpetuate it?

I first published American Born Chinese as a series of mini-comics and a webcomic. The readership was much, much smaller than that of the graphic novel, but occasionally I'd still receive e-mail giving me feedback on my work. Every now and then, I'd get one that would make me question everything. "That Chin-Kee story was hilarious!" it would tell me.

Cousin Chin-Kee isn't meant to be 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.

For every ignorant piece of feedback, I'd get a dozen more that were with me, that understood where I was going and wanted to follow. These e-mails felt my anger seething beneath Cousin Chin-Kee's toothy smile.

These e-mails convinced me to carry on.

To those of you who are offended by every third chapter of American Born Chinese, I say this: Thank you. You're supposed to be offended. That was the desired response.

You see, Cousin Chin-Kee is no more my creation than the Monkey King. I yanked him, every last detail about him, straight out of American pop culture. One of his most over-the-top lines is a word-for-word quotation from a political cartoon by an award-winning, nationally-syndicated cartoonist. In a lunchroom scene in the sixth chapter of American Born Chinese, Cousin Chin-Kee offers Danny a bite of his "crispy fried cat gizzards with noodles." On April 9, 2001, in response to the Chinese spy plane crisis, American political cartoonist Pat Oliphant drew a six panel strip depicting Uncle Sam's visit to a Chinese restaurant, where he is served "crispy fried cat gizzards with noodles" by a slant-eyed, bucktoothed waiter. Outside of a few angry Asian-American columnists writing for small Asian-American audiences, the entire matter slipped out of public consciousness without so much as an embarrassed blush of the cheek from Oliphant.

Cousin Chin-Kee just keeps coming back to visit. In the 80's, he showed up as Long Duk Dong in Sixteen Candles. More recently, he reared his ugly head in movie critic Rex Reed's review of the Korean film Old Boy. When the American public caught a glimpse of him in William Hung's American Idol performance, Hung was promptly made the most recognizable Asian-American male in the world. Every time Asian America thinks it's finally time to breathe easy, the doorbell

rings and we find Cousin Chin-Kee on the doorstep with a piece of take-out box luggage in each hand.

America simply isn't sensitive to modern slurs against Asian-Americans. As a nation we know that Fu Manchu isn't politically correct, of course, but what's so bad about making fun of someone for switching up her R's and L's? We don't connect modern incidents of "poking fun" at Asian-Americans with their historical roots, with the kind of late 19th/early 20th century imagery that accompanied the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the World War II Japanese-American internment camps.

The fact of the matter is, sometimes you have to exaggerate to get your point across. Sometimes a stereotype needs to be dressed up in bright yellow skin and a queue in order for folks to recognize its severity.

So does acknowledging a stereotype perpetuate it? There certainly is that danger. But there's also the danger of brushing off stereotypes with a polite grin and downward glance. And given Asian America's historical lack of political participation, which is the greater danger? After all, if I hadn't invited Cousin Chin-Kee – this grotesque creation of Sax Rohmer and John Hughes, of Pat Oliphant and my second grade classmates – into the pages of my comic book, if I hadn't pointed him out and called him by name, I would never have been able to behead him.

Posted by Mark Siegel at 03:15:04 PM