



## Identity Crisis Portrayed in the Graphic Novel *American Born Chinese*

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### Article Info

### Abstract

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This study aims to analyze the issue of identity crisis in the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (2006) by Gene Luen Yang. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive method, data were meticulously collected and analyzed through Erik Erikson's theory of the eight stages of psychosocial development, framed within a psychoanalytic approach. The primary focus is on the main character, Jin Wang, whose identity crisis becomes evident upon his transfer to a new school where he is surrounded by a predominantly American environment. This transition triggers a profound sense of dislocation and self-doubt, as Jin struggles to reconcile his Chinese heritage with the cultural expectations of his peers. His identity crisis is manifested through various attitudes and thoughts, such as his desire to fit in and his internalized shame about his ethnicity. These behaviors reflect Erikson's concept of identity versus role confusion, a pivotal stage in adolescent development where individuals grapple with their sense of self. The study's findings underscore the psychological turmoil faced by Jin as he navigates the complexities of his dual identity. This analysis highlights the broader implications of cultural assimilation and the challenges faced by immigrants in preserving their cultural identity while seeking acceptance in a new societal context.

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## INTRODUCTION

Erik Erikson's work has highlighted the importance of a person questioning their sense of self and place in the world. This period of questioning is known as an identity crisis, where the individual undergoes intensive exploration to gain an understanding of themselves. During adolescence, this is particularly important as it is a time of great change and growth. Though it is not limited to this stage, the development of an identity is a continuous process throughout life.

Building an individual's identity is a combination of their personal experience and the experience of their community (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Adolescence is the period when this process usually happens, as their minds are mature enough to create their own opinions of themselves (Elkind, 1998). Erikson (1980) thought this part of life was a particularly crucial moment, calling it an 'identity crisis'. A person's identity is formed by exploring different possibilities and making decisions based on what they learn. If someone fails to form a strong identity, they may suffer from identity disorientation, meaning they don't know who they are and their place in the world.

Developing a sense of identity is essential for an individual to comprehend themselves and their place in society. Adams and Marshall (1996) determined that identity formation furnishes five functions: it offers organization and structure to self-knowledge; it creates a consistent and coherent comprehension of beliefs, targets, and self-awareness; it allows for a sense of continuity of past and future; it supplies objectives and direction; and it gives a sense of autonomy over one's decisions and outcomes. As Erikson suggests, it is normal for individuals to experience an identity crisis at some point in their lives.

People often experience identity crises at different points in their lives, not just during adolescence. Going through a crisis can be a positive or negative experience, depending on how one views it. It can lead to a person questioning their value system and their role in the world and can motivate them to adopt new values and better understand their relationships with others. However, it can also be a stressful and confusing process, making one feel stuck and lost.

An identity crisis can be explored in several forms of literature, such as graphic novels. As defined by Ilorrence (2011), graphic literature is a combination of art and text that expresses a message more effectively than words alone. Commonly known as comics, this type of literature is favored by many as it is much more captivating than regular reading due to its incorporation of visuals. Because of this, stories told through graphic novels remain interesting as they are supplemented with pictures that help tell the tale.

*American Born Chinese* (2006) by Gene Luen Yang explores the issue of identity crisis through the story of Jin Wang, a child of Chinese descent living in Chinatown, San Francisco, who is forced to move to a school in the suburbs. Jin Wang finds himself out of place among his peers and is the target of racial discrimination, leading him to try and assimilate to the American way of life. This transformation continues until he is a teenager and ultimately culminates in an identity crisis.

To support the research, this study aims to illustrate some of Jin Wang's behaviors that are representative of an identity crisis. This analysis will utilize the concepts of Erik Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development to analyze the data..

## METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research method, which focuses on understanding meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, and descriptions of phenomena (Breg, 2001). The qualitative approach is particularly well-suited for exploring complex issues such as identity crises, as it allows for an in-depth examination of personal experiences and social contexts. The research object for this study is the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (2006) by Gene Luen Yang. This graphic novel provides a rich source of data due to its complex narrative and visual elements, which effectively portray the protagonist's identity struggles. The psychoanalysis approach is utilized to analyze the data, with a theoretical framework grounded in Erik Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development. Erikson's theory is instrumental in understanding the developmental challenges and identity formation processes that individuals undergo, particularly during adolescence. By applying Erikson's stages, the study aims to dissect the protagonist Jin Wang's experiences and behaviors, identifying key moments that signify his identity crisis. Data collection involves a close reading of the graphic novel, focusing on the protagonist's interactions, thoughts, and emotional responses. Key scenes and dialogues are analyzed to identify patterns that align with Erikson's stages of development. This detailed examination helps in

understanding how Jin Wang's identity crisis unfolds and how he navigates the complexities of his dual cultural identity. Additionally, the study considers the visual elements of the graphic novel, as these are crucial in conveying emotional nuances and cultural contexts that complement the textual narrative. By integrating both textual and visual analysis, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of the protagonist's identity crisis. The descriptive nature of the qualitative method allows for a rich, detailed exploration of the identity issues depicted in the graphic novel. This approach ensures that the analysis captures the depth of the protagonist's psychological and social challenges, offering insights into the broader implications of cultural assimilation and identity formation in a multicultural context..

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the author analyzes Jin Wang's identity crisis as depicted in American Born Chinese. The analysis identifies Jin Wang's experiences as reflecting two of Erikson's stages: Stage 4 (Industry vs. Inferiority) and Stage 5 (Identity vs. Role Confusion). These stages are illustrated through Jin Wang's struggles with self-esteem and identity, highlighting his crisis.

### 1.1 Being Not Confident With Own Culture



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Figure 1.1

In its development, children will be introduced to the social environment and a lot of interaction in it. Several factors that support this stage are the circle of friends and the people involved. They will begin to show their abilities, self-concept, and pride in themselves. The value, feedback, and praise received are one of the factors that strengthen self-confidence. Those who receive the most praise will usually build a strong sense of self-confidence, while those who receive the least will begin to doubt their abilities.

The beginning of this stage was described by Jin Wang when he was introduced as a new third-year elementary school student. A teacher introduces him as "Jin Jang" with a mispronounced name; a transfer student from China. Then, a student shouted, "San Francisco, San Francisco!" which is the city where the oldest Chinatown area in the US is known as Chinatown. This made Jin Wang, who

initially felt fine when he was in an environment with a majority of the population of the same descent, began to shrink when he blended into an environment where the majority of Americans were. Starting from here, the identity competition begins.



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Figure 1.2



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Figure 1.3

In this situation, Figure 1.2 is a situation where Jin Wang is with his friends. In this stage, classmates play an important role in the formation of Jin Wang's self-confidence. However, the treatment of his friends that distinguished Jin Wang only because of racial differences, made Jin Wang lose confidence in being himself. According to Erikson (1950, p. 243) where the schoolchild begins to feel that the color of his skin, the background of his parents, or the fashion of his clothes rather than his wish and his will to learn will decide his worth as an apprentice, and thus his sense of identity - to which we must now turn. In this situation, Jin Wang chose to leave his habits as a Chinese to adapt to the habits of the Americans themselves. This can be seen in the transition in Figure 1.2, where at first Jin Wang chose Chinese dumplings for lunch, he then chose to eat sandwiches as a lunch menu like in Figure 1.3 to look the same as his American friends. It could be assumed that at this stage, Jin Wang had lost any confidence in his own true identity.



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Figure 1.4

In Figure 1.4 there is a new student from Taiwan named Wei-Chen who wants to get to know Jin Wang. Jin Wang then replied, "You're in America. Speak English." which could be taken to mean that Jin Wang did not want to use his native language even with his own racemates. This means that

Jin Wang's actions are slowly starting to want to change his original identity with the new identity he wants, which is to be similar to Americans.

### 1.2 Being Want to be Like Everyone Else



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Figure 2.1

Wanting to be like others is one of the characteristics of a crisis identity. Figure 2.1 is a situation when Jin Wang started to think about changing his appearance, especially his hairstyle like Greg's. Greg is an American man with blonde curly hair. He is close friends with Amelia, the girl Jin Wang loves. Low self-confidence about his physique and appearance style, makes Jin Wang want to be like Greg so he can look cool in front of Amelia. This case relates to stage 5 of the eight stages of psychosocial development, namely identity vs. role confusion. In this stage what is highlighted is the social relationship including the role of sexual feelings that make a person explore more about himself. How he feels and how he looks in front of other people, and how to make himself feel appropriate when he is with other people. These questions represent Jin Wang's actions during his puberty.

### 1.3 Self-identity Returns to Origin



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Figure 3.1

After going through several events and exploring himself, Jin Wang at the end of the story chooses to return to his original identity as a Chinese. This is indicated by two cups of pearl milk tea, which is

a drink originating from China as shown in Figure 3.1. Unlike when he was in elementary school, he tried to replace dumplings with sandwiches, by ordering pearl milk tea implying Jin Wang has accepted himself and self-identity returned to his origin.

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## CONCLUSION

The identity crisis is a developmental event that involves a person questioning their sense of self or place in the world. It is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. The process of identity development is both an individual and social phenomenon, and is important for a person's understanding of self and participation in their social systems. An identity crisis can be a positive experience, encouraging a person to question their values and place in the world and embrace new values. However, it can also be stressful and lead to identity confusion if a person feels stuck in the process. The graphic novel "American Born Chinese" by Gene Luen Yang deals with the theme of identity crisis, specifically in the character of Jin Wang, a child of Chinese descent living in San Francisco who struggles to fit in at his new school in the suburbs and deal with racial discrimination.

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