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The Monkey King and his Struggle with Identity

In the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, through the use of panel and image position, the author conveys the theme of identity, which reveals that it is not necessary for people to abandon their identity, to change themselves in order to be accepted and respected by others; people should accept and value their identity as it is.

Initially, the character Monkey King feels unhappy and disrespected because of his identity as a monkey, so he changes himself to make others accept and respect him; and in the end, he learns a valuable lesson that accepting, respecting himself along with respecting others is the way to get accepted and respected back. Everything begins with The Monkey King being made fun of at a party, and as an effort to be seen differently from others, he masters twelve major disciplines of Kung-fu and declares that “[he] shall now be called The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven” (Yang 60). In this scene, his body is drawn noticeably big, going out of the panel borders. It shows that he has changed a lot: taller, bigger, stronger, and can stand like a human being; it proves that his effort of changing himself has come to a great result. One more significant thing about his body, it shows that he thinks he has changed a lot and that nothing can stop him, and it is true that even the panel borders could not stop him! The title “The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven” that he gives himself is also another clear evidence that proves his thinking. This evidence shows that he has struggled a lot and worked so hard to change, to be seen

differently by others. But instead of choosing to be a calmful and helpful person, to be seen positively, he chooses violence. He masters major disciplines of Kung-fu to beat others, to force others to respect him with fear! He even comes up with a mighty and fearful title for him. He thinks that he has achieved the goal he wants, that he has changed into a whole different “person” and now others have to see him with acceptance and respect. But look at the reality. “This monkey will be the death of us!” (Yang 67), this is what others see about the aggressive Monkey King at the moment! It makes the readers wonder: Is it true that others have respected him, not seen him as a monkey anymore? The answer is, obviously, no. The evidence above reveals that people want to change and be seen by others with respect. But sometimes people choose to become violent and be seen with no actual respect but fear, which is not a wise decision. After being buried by Tze-Yo-Tzuh under a mountain rock for five hundred years and enlightened by a monk named Wong Lai-Tsao, The Monkey King decides to follow the monk as his disciple, completes the Journey to the West, and stands in the holy presence of Tze-Yo-Tzuh. And the most important thing is that he has “realized how good it is to be a monkey.” (Yang 223). In this scene, The Monkey King confesses to Jin what he has gone through and says that now he has accepted his identity as a monkey; before that, he had always tried to make others not see him like that. He mentions that he was buried and then freed from the mountain rock, which is also relevant to the release of the heavy struggle that The Monkey King has always had, the struggle of changing his identity. It shows that The Monkey King has finally found a way to get accepted and respected by others: accept and respect himself first. This evidence reveals that in this world, people have to accept and respect their identity, as well as respect others to gain respect from others. In conclusion, The Monkey King conveys the significance of identity because, throughout the story, he has been struggling with changing himself. He tries to make

others accept and respect him by abandoning his identity as a monkey. After that, many things happen to him, bad and good. And in the end, he realizes that accepting and respecting his identity is the way to get accepted and respected.

Overall, it is not necessary for people to abandon their identity, to change themselves in order to be accepted and respected by others; people should accept and value their identity as it is. That claim has been proved in the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, through the use of panel and image position, which conveys the theme of identity.