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**HEGEMONY AND MANIPULATIVE RHETORIC TO KEEP ‘THE  
OTHER’ SUBMISSIVE IN “AMERICAN BORN CHINESE”**

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**ABSTRACT**

It is impossible to find cultural boundaries on a map because they are not synonymous with geographical boundaries. However, they are to be found in how society or a community conducts its affairs within and outside its confines. Communities have had various cultural boundaries that seek to distinguish them from the rest (Gina, 2017). But culture itself is a social construct, which is in many cases deliberated by the aristocrats and the bourgeoisies to keep the ‘have-nots’ suppressed. When the monkey king from the novel *American Born Chinese* wanted to learn and progress, he was not allowed to. This paper employs Marxist criticism to understand why and how this is done, a problem that is highly debated and argued over in the society – the problem being the societal construct itself. The paper also employs the theory of Ideological state apparatus, which is primarily the use of social institutions like government, religion, culture and such as a means to keep ‘the other’ inferior.

**KEYWORDS**

American Born Chinese, Hegemony, Marxist criticism, monkey king, power.

**INTRODUCTION**

As long as human beings have existed, there have been some limits on what they can do and what they are prohibited from doing. Notably, this has been in tandem with what their beliefs and perceives are within the confines of the cultural boundaries. By definition, cultural boundaries relate to the geographical region where people who share the same

practices, beliefs, norms, attitudes, and perceptions are confined. This may extend to language, ethnicity, and religious practices (Rob, 2005).

One part of the story narrates the ordeal that faced the author being one of the few Chinese Americans in a Northern California school dominated by the whites. The author had to struggle to fit within the school because it was not the school's culture to accommodate those who were not purely white. To actualize his experience, the novelist pens down a story of three characters, the Monkey King, the Chinese-American boy, Jin, and Chin-Kee, who are ridiculed and stereotyped because they do not subscribe to the cultural definition of the Americans. Their lives are characterized by subtle forms of racism which pain them as inferior beings. \_\_\_\_\_

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Cultural boundaries have been that American students cannot mix with student drawn from other races. "I want you to pack up and go back to where you came from!" (Danny p.205)

Though the novel "American Born Chinese" is penned by an author of Chinese origin, the suggested idea in his novel that people embrace the identity, culture and background into which they were born could be embedded with a subtly hidden agenda of 'hegemony'. The manipulative actions, rhetoric, and the plot even aid in strategically making the characters accept the 'hegemony' by consent. "Gramsci saw civil society as the public sphere where trade unions and political parties gained concessions from the bourgeois state, and the sphere in which ideas and beliefs were shaped, where bourgeois 'hegemony' was reproduced in cultural life through the media, universities and religious institutions to 'manufacture consent' and legitimacy" (Heywood 1994: 100-101).

The retold story of the money king, who despite his wish to progress, is made to do what the superior beings want him to do. Though the shoes he wanted to wear was never in the dictionary of his life, the fact that it is a symbol of progress cannot be denied. The monkey king, being the inferior of many creations that we see throughout the story, can be called "the other". Those superior to 'the other' being try all the possible means, from the use of an authoritative rhetoric to a violent action in the party in heaven to a polite, yet

guilt-tripping, manipulative eloquence of the monk, to make the monkey king undergo a reversion to the status quo ante or as 'the other'.

### **THE MONKEY KING AND CHIN-KEE**

The narrative that surrounds the origin, existence and purpose of the monkey king's life can easily draw a comparison with the story of creation in Christian scripture, The Bible, where the man is seen as a being created by a superior being, "God", whom he was supposed to worship and serve. When the man deviated from the instruction of 'the superior', he was punished, a case that seems so similar to the punishment suffered by the monkey king, being grounded for 500 years, until he agreed to follow, Wong Lai-Tsao, a monk nominated by Tze-Yo-Tzuh, the creator, on a journey to the west. Though the monkey king changes himself, deciding to follow the sage, foregoing his pursuit of progress and prosperity, and regrets to Jin about how his son Wei Chen told him that he is going to live his own life instead of serving the humans who, according to him seemed 'PETTY' and 'SOULLESS' creatures, we can clearly see that at this point, the monkey king is not living his life, but is instead following the instructions of the superior that want him to live his life a certain inferior way. "...the system of interlocked institutions, practices, worldviews, expectations, hopes, and fears that make the status quo seem natural and unchallengeable." (Donald Hall, *Literary and Cultural Theory*). "Hegemony is like an internalized form of social control which makes certain views seem 'natural' or invisible so that they hardly seem like views at all, just 'the way things are'." (*Beginning Theory*, page: 158)

The ideology that some people are born a certain inferior way is ingrained in our society, culture and we accept them as natural, were as in reality, it is one of the many tactics used by the upper class to keep the 'other' inferior. "Ideology functions as the superstructure of a civilization: the conventions and culture that make up the dominant ideas of a society." (Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Marx: On Ideology." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*). Though he was determined till the end to continue learning new things and adding more power to himself like learning Kung Fu, just one intimidating question by the monk about his soul, "IS YOURS THE ETERNAL PRISONER...OF A MOUNTAIN OF ROCK? (Wong Lai-Tsao p. 149), changes his mind and the projection of the monkey king changes to a positive one when he finally obeys the orders of the superior. He even

confesses to Jin in the end, "YOU KNOW, JIN, I WOULD HAVE SAVED MYSELF FROM FIVE HUNDRED YEARS' IMPRISONMENT BENEATH A MOUNTAIN OF ROCK HAD I ONLY REALIZED HOW GOOD IT IS TO BE A MONKEY." (The Monkey King P. 223) The appropriateness of the author's message through the retelling of the monkey king story, which is to embrace one's own identity, no matter where they are placed in the world, is questionable here, as the monkey king after accepting his identity and in following the monk, only seems to be a living being that follows and does things according to the orders given by the superiors, not having a life and will of its own. To naturally make people accept that they were born inferior and were meant to serve those superior to them is one of the key points that Marxist criticism points out as being prevalent in any society that wants to maintain class differences, an important tool that helps the bourgeoisies enjoy special treatment and privilege in the society. The resonating message in the novel seems to glorify the idea of willingness of forego one's own life to serve according to the instruction given by someone else, just because they were born inferior, while 'the superiors' themselves might be pursuing their lives according to their will. Louis Althusser in his essay, "**Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)**" talks about how the ruling class uses the **repressive state apparatuses (RSA)** to dominate the working class. The basic, social function of the RSA (government, courts, police and armed forces, etc.) is timely intervention to politics in favor of the interests of the ruling class, by repressing the subordinate social classes as required, either by violent or nonviolent coercive means. The ruling class controls the RSA, because they also control the powers of the state (Leitch, Vincent B. (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. pp. 1483–1496).

All the while when the monkey king pursued his own path in life, he was projected as an irrational, immature being, not having the ability to think sensibly, not having a grasp of the kind of language he was supposed to use with a monk. He was projected as someone who disobeyed orders, traditions, and even the order of existence, though these things in themselves are to be questioned, for many of it seem to be defined to keep 'the other' submissive.

Of all the characters that have been given human form in the graphic novel, Chin-kee is not given a handsome face. He is a hyper-active, intelligent, willing to volunteer and

enthusiastic guy whose dress and attire are not very attractive. Though certain positive characteristics seem inherent in him, for the most part of the story he is projected in a negative light. He fails to perceive the mood, feelings, and the kind of language used around him, especially Danny's mood and Danny's implied language that he does not want Chin-Kee around. He is also projected to be a gross creature, peeing in Steve's coke, and laughing it off to Danny; eating noodles with cat meat, and neither realizing that he was grossing everyone around him out, nor even appearing to care about what others around him thought about him. The fact that Danny had switched schools just to escape the shame Chin-Kee created for him does not stop Chin-Kee from following Danny to his new school. When Danny reaches a point beyond which he could not tolerate Chin-Kee anymore, he tries to make Chin-Kee understand what and how he feels about Chin-Kee, only to be refused to listen or accept by Chin-Kee. At this point Chin-Kee appears to be an irritating creature, projected as someone who lacks sensible thinking, just wanting to pursue his dreams at the cost of others' happiness. But, in fact, the monkey king, who had taken the form of Chin-Kee, had a valid reason as to why he was following Jin. His son Wei-Chen, who promised him that he would be back after completing his volunteered mission, was still out there in the world. He originally appeared in Jin's school as a Taiwanese boy with a robot toy, and the monkey king had promised to meet his son every year for the 40 years of his life as human. But there comes a point when Wei-Chen realizes that humans are 'PETTY' and 'SOULLESS' creatures and decides to live his life his own way.

The projection of this idea that pursuing one's thoughts and will might cost others appears to be a manipulative strategy to dissuade people from pursuing their will and to settle for something the superior wants them to settle for, which is exactly what the bourgeoisies would want from the proletariats or 'the have-nots'. When we come to know towards the end that Chin-Kee is none other than the monkey king himself, and that he was there because his son went his own way, pursuing the things of the world, the question that might pop in a reader's mind is whether he was projected that way because he was again doing something that made him look different from who he originally was, a new version better than a monkey and was doing something that his heart wanted, which was to get his son back. "This idea of a 'counter-hegemonic' struggle – advancing alternatives to dominant ideas of what is normal and legitimate – has had broad appeal in social and political movements. It has also contributed to the idea that 'knowledge' is a social construct that

serves to legitimate social structures" (Heywood 1994: 101). (Heywood, Andrew (1994) *Political Ideas and Concepts: An Introduction*, London, Macmillan.)

## CONCLUSION

From analyzing the projection of the character of monkey king in the novel, one can clearly sense class and power still being a predominant tool to keep the class structure of the society intact. The efforts by the monkey king to free himself and live the life he wanted are either suppressed by violent means, including punishments, or through manipulative tactics. The concept of hegemony, coined by Gramsci, is sometimes apparent, while at times it remains obscure.

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